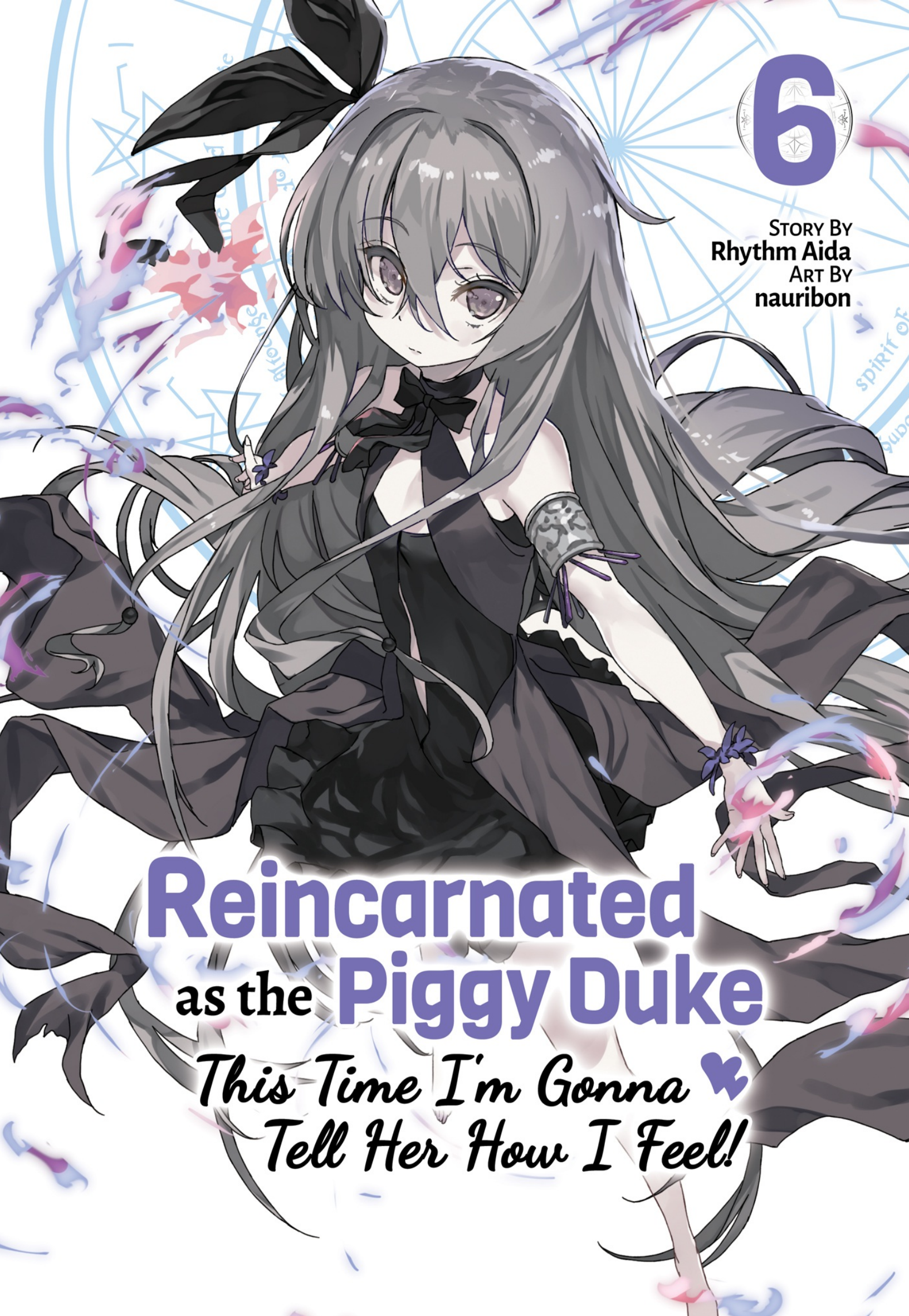




6

STORY BY
Rhythm Aida
ART BY
nauribon



Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*





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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!



“The Piggy Duke was intelligent, strong, kindhearted, and sadly, too stubborn for his own good. From another perspective, the story of Shuya Marionette can be interpreted as his tragedy.”

—Director of Shuya Marionette

Prologue: The One Who Goes against the Tide

The history of the northern half of the continent was decorated with conflict after conflict. Its climate hindered the land's crops from ever being bountiful, and in addition, heretic cultists had decreed a foreigner as their deity. However, instead of denouncing these wars, the culture of the north celebrated fighting in the name of survival as a thing of beauty.

The Dustour Empire was located here in the north, and its main settlement of Dustour City, also known as the Stone Capital, was built on the edge of a steep cliff. The ruling class of Dustour lived in this rock cave temple, and its unpredictable, mazelike interior was not unlike an ants' nest. Legend had it that enemies of the empire would never find a way out once they wandered into it.

Deep inside the temple was a certain room; no light could find its way into it, and the air was perpetually damp. Darkness engulfed the entire facility, broken only by dim flickers of light from candlestick lamps that revealed a number of unknown tools dangling from the walls. The instruments gleamed ominously, leaving one wondering about their purpose.

It was easy to assume that this peculiar room's owner was either a recluse or an eccentric old researcher absorbed in their obsession. However, inside this room, a youthful maiden sat on a leather chair.

"Give me your report, Rooney," she said.

Despite her looks, her true nature was a far cry from the human girl she appeared to be.

She sat with her legs crossed and her eyes fixed on the man kneeling before her. His physique was a sight to behold, hinting at the dangerous strength within, and from his looks, it was obvious that his line of work wasn't the respectable type. He stayed still and lowered his head, sporting a grin of ecstasy on his face as he began to answer the owner of the room.

"My master, where shall I start? No, perhaps the better question is, whose

actions do you want to hear about first?”

“Oh, quit it with the farce! Of course I want to know about *those guys* first!” she said grumpily.

“In that case, I suppose I’ll start with movements in the Southern Alliance. The various countries there are glaring at us with hostility from across the border between the north and the south, marked by the Grant Wetlands...”

The master of the room displayed her annoyance, but even her glare was endearing in Rooney’s eyes. Every second of conversation with her was invaluable to him. She was the brain of the Dustour Empire; a superpower that had expanded her territory so much that half of the continent was now occupied under her flag.

She was both a human and something beyond—she was the famed Great Spirit of Darkness.

“Well, those guys would probably only make the first move when hell freezes over, so let’s not waste time with them,” she said flippantly. “What about Bardot?”

The man’s name that she whispered was another household name in this continent, like hers, with his tales told far and wide.

“The aged general is currently withdrawing his soldiers from the Grant Wetlands in increments just as you wished, Master. I should have expected nothing less from the man who proclaims himself to be your greatest worshipper. Despite your orders being contradictory to your previous ones, he immediately changed gears and acted when he heard that it was your will. For that elderly man, the word ‘doubt’ doesn’t exist when it comes to you. I am sure that he would die without question if you ordered it so.”

“Leave out all the extra stuff. Just tell me the facts and what’s going on.”

“Ah, please excuse my rudeness. The General of the Army, Bardot, issued his commands and the soldiers heeded them without a fuss. Their withdrawal was as swift as possible and was carried out without complaint.”

Rooney continued, “From the start, the soldiers were fatigued from the frequent wars to subjugate the northern half, and deep in their hearts, they

dreaded the upcoming war with the south. After all, it is a war with both its start and conclusion date shrouded in mystery. Though plans of uniting the continent under Dustour's flag have been scrapped, there are probably many who are secretly rejoicing."

"We must provide our soldiers with sufficient rest."

"General Bardot knows your compassion better than anyone else, Master, and naturally, he has acted on that knowledge. He has ordered soldiers who have served a long tour to go on leave, and has arranged for them to return to their families."

"I see. I won't comment further on it, then."

The fate of the world had changed. If everything had gone according to plan, Rooney would have declared that the war should begin as soon as possible. However, after his return from Huzak, he had reported to the Great Spirit of Darkness that although uniting the continent was feasible, there would be little benefit. Hearing his analysis, she had made a different decision.

One of the Three Musketeers, Bardot, was unquestionably at the top of the chain of command of military affairs in the Dustour Empire. He had stationed soldiers along the border with the south in preparation, and after this new development, Nanatrij had ordered him to recall all of those troops.

"I must say though, Master, I honestly didn't expect you to call off the war with the south only based on my comments. I was completely convinced that you had been joking, and—"

"Rooney, I gave you full authority to judge whether invading the south was a worthwhile endeavor, and I had sent you to Huzak with that in mind. That's all I have to say about that."

"If that aged general heard about this conversation, I am willing to bet that he would seethe with envy."

The Great Spirit of Darkness had an exceedingly favorable opinion of the man she had sent to Huzak. She had trained this man to be someone like herself, someone whose judgment wouldn't be blinded by emotions, and who could achieve his goals like a fine-tuned machine. And this man had been the one who

had advised her to abort her plan on the basis that they might be caught off guard by a devastating counterattack on a scale they could never expect.

If Rooney had decided that this plan wasn't worth it, then it was impossible for her to have any objections. Since Bardot had command over the military, she'd left the plans for the retreat to him. Furthermore, she had also told Dreibach Steibelt, her other spy she sent to the south and a member of the Three Musketeers, to fall back.

"Putting that aside..." The Great Spirit trailed off. "What is the south's response?"

"As expected, the countries in the south are in disarray and are completely thrown off. Those rats that they had snuck into the empire all tried to spring into action to figure out our goals. I have lost count of how many infiltrators we have caught during these past few days." Rooney shrugged.

Nanatrij narrowed her eyes. "Surely you haven't killed them, have you?"

"I made sure to give them plenty of 'souvenirs' and let them go. With this, our intentions are probably clear to the countries in the south now. There might be some nations simmering in anger, thinking that we have played them for fools, but dealing with them falls down to the alliance leader of the Great Southern Alliance. That means Daryth, the Country of Knights, and how skillfully they can navigate it all. As for the messenger we sent there, they have fulfilled their duty. According to them, the higher-ups over there are most likely willing to accept a peace treaty. It's the obvious choice since the empire is willingly withdrawing our troops and not asking for anything in return. To those in the south, there aren't terms more favorable than these."

There was a brief pause before Nanatrij spoke up again. "Good job, Rooney. It was probably tough for you out there too. So, what's the flip side? The problems?"

"We haven't been able to fully conceal information about the Living Dead's injuries. The rebel factions in various places have heard the rumors and are buzzing with excitement. Right now, that witch and her subordinates are keeping them in check, but if all the rebel troops were to band together, they would become a formidable force. Much blood would likely flow again."

“Is that the only thing you consider problematic?”

“Well...” Rooney paused, thinking.

What had surprised everyone was how Dreibach Steibelt had done something completely unexpected after her summons. The half-human, half-fiend had nearly destroyed Zenelaus, despite orders warning him to stay away.

The Great Spirit of Darkness had received reports about how the musketeer was possibly going rogue, and she had then immediately rushed towards the far end of the southern territory.

If any of the Three Musketeers manifested their powers, an entire city could easily crumble into dust. The cities in the south were not as powerful as in the north, and even Zenelaus, the great city of adventurers, was no exception.

But if that truly happened, it would be problematic for everyone. If people heard that a musketeer had been dispatched to Zenelaus, an all-out war with the south would be unavoidable.

In yet another twist of events, however, the man renowned as the Living Dead had suffered defeat at the end of his insubordination. He had *lost*. Nobody had expected this—how could anyone have ever considered the possibility of that man losing?

“What is it? Get to the point already.”

“It’s nothing. I just find it absurd to think that the Living Dead himself lost. It was a word I’d never associated with him.”

“Nothing is impossible in this world, Rooney. You should know that best since you suffered a harsh setback in Huzak.”

In Zenelaus, an elusive Great Spirit had appeared: Eldred, the Great Spirit of Fire. There was even a young man who could draw out and channel the Great Spirit’s power, and as a result, one of the Three Musketeers had been defeated.

The worst-case scenario was avoided, however. No, perhaps what had actually happened could be deemed to be the most ideal outcome. Eldred had only destroyed the lich that had bound the musketeer and went no further.

“There is the possibility that someone might start to object to your decisions,

Master.”

“I don’t remember there being anyone in this empire who would go against me.”

“There isn’t. Or, that’s what I would like to say with confidence, but...”
Rooney hesitated to complete his sentence.

After this series of events, Nanatrij had seen for herself that Rooney’s analysis had indeed been on point. If the empire began a war with the south, Eldred probably wouldn’t stay out of it. The very last thing Nanatrij wanted to do was to face that lunatic spirit. There was also the fact that there were many Great Spirits in the south that took the side of humans...and that was only counting the ones that she knew about.

For example, the Great Spirit of Light was in the Country of Knights, and the Great Spirit of Water was in Cirquista. Those two would definitely participate if a war broke out. Even though she had her musketeers that she’d trained into warriors powerful enough to kill Great Spirits, Eldred joining the fray meant a messy, tough war that would drag on with no easy way out.

“It seems that someone with opposing opinions has indeed made their appearance. I must say that they arrived much earlier than I expected. But Master...did you actually notice their presence from the start?”

The door slowly opened, and light from outside spilled into the room. However, seemingly contrary to Rooney’s words, there were no footsteps, and nobody came in. Still, Rooney placed a hand over the knife on his waist as he kept his head lowered. His eyes were fixed on the floor and his whole body stayed tense.

“I must say, I feel downright awful,” he muttered. “To think that *I*, of all people, didn’t notice someone sneaking up behind my back.”

A silhouette appeared behind Rooney, slipping into view like a wavering shadow.

The room was silent, and nobody had physically walked in, yet that person now stood there, almost as if declaring that they had just as much right to be there as the others.

“I believe I have just experienced the most hair-raising moment of my life,” Rooney commented.

The woman who had suddenly appeared behind Rooney finally spoke up. “My lady, Alliance Leader. I have heard that you are withdrawing troops from our border with Daryth.”

Her hair was a snowy white, and it somehow gave her an aura of sorrowful solitude. The woman looked to be in her early twenties, but she had a bewitching air to her that wasn’t common for her age; like a flower in full bloom.

Her eyes were gently shut, and she wore the cusp of a smile on her lips. There was something angelic about her expression, and she could almost be mistaken for a priestess.

“Rooney’s right. Your entrance was appalling. So, what do *you* want?”

“Knowing your perceptiveness, Alliance Leader, you must have realized that I’ve been here from the very beginning. I entered this room at the same time as that man.”

“You’re a nasty piece of work, as always. I seem to remember putting you in charge of the massive task of subjugating the rebel army gathering in Goldbeck. Why are you slacking off by being here instead?”

“You see, I happened to have heard a very peculiar rumor. It was a ridiculous story about how soldiers stationed at the Grant Wetlands were returning to their homelands one after another...”

“Well, I guess there’s a wonderful general out there who really cares for his soldiers,” Nanatrij commented nonchalantly.

“I felt very much left in the dark, so I decided that I should come here and beg for you to enlighten me as to your thoughts.”

“When I thought about all of the people who could possibly go against my will, you were just about the only one who came to mind, Francisca. And I was right.”

There were very few people who had access to the private quarters of the

Great Spirit of Darkness. The only way to enter was either to gain her permission or to forcefully destroy its tenacious barrier.

An average mage probably wouldn't even be able to make heads or tails of the element used to uphold the barrier protecting her residence. This woman must have taken advantage of Rooney and used him to gain entry.

"That's not surprising, considering that you surround yourself with people who have abandoned rational thought and critical thinking altogether, whether it be that man over there or the aged general."

"Yes, exactly, Francisca. I am surrounded by people who faithfully obey my will, and that's why the Dustour Empire has been able to flourish to the extent that we see today."

Nanatrij's method of operation was nearly tyrannical, but she was confident in her actions. The Dustour Empire had only grown into such a superpower because of her abilities. No other being in this world could go against her decisions, and that was commonly accepted by the citizens of the south.

However, the woman with the snowy hair was different. Beneath her noncommittal expression, scorching-hot anger burned within her, and she had come all the way here while bearing its heat.

Rooney's concern from earlier had been realized, but the alliance leader with the youthful appearance wasn't perturbed at all.

"In that case, I'll spell it out for you, loud and clear. My plan to unite the continent as one has been suspended and has thus been thrown out the window. That's my final decision."

Nanatrij's flippant remark silenced Francisca for a moment before she could reply. "You made such a major decision without explaining anything to *me*, one of the Three Musketeers. Do you not think such an action is a little inconsiderate? I had put in an extremely strenuous amount of effort to prepare for realizing your plan."

Francisca was heralded as one of the Three Musketeers, the strongest people in the empire. Despite Nanatrij's cool demeanor, Francisca disregarded her words as if they were grating on her nerves.

“Hah! Inconsiderate, you say? Stop changing the topic, Francisca. I entrusted you with quelling the uprising that the surviving former great powers of the north are scheming. What is the state of things there and with taking down Goldbeck?”

“I have left the matter in the hands of people who can be trusted. You could say that they are to me what that man means to you: people whom you can trust with no reservations.”

“Oh really?” Nanatrij cocked an eyebrow. “Unlike you, however, I haven’t done anything underhanded like brainwashing Rooney with potions.”

“I did not come back to the imperial capital to waste time on meaningless chitchat. Alliance Leader, please tell me why you scrapped your plans.”

This doesn’t look good, Rooney thought. The man who had been nicknamed the demon of Huzak was now a bystander, and he had noticed that Francisca’s mood was gradually souring. *I can’t let this go on.*

The power of the musketeers was a good match for the power of his revered Great Spirit of Darkness. From the very beginning, the title of musketeer was given to those who compared favorably with the Great Spirits.

A worst-case scenario flashed in Rooney’s mind. He had to do something to avoid these two unleashing their powers here at all costs.

However, he had no intention of participating in this conversation at all. Francisca was known as the Dream Dealer Witch and the Healing Doctor for a reason, and when it came to her, letting sleeping dogs lie was the best policy.

“Was it because of that man over there? That frail person you sent to Huzak? I heard that he was the one who had the final say.”

Rooney stayed still and silent.

“Even if he is a favorite of yours, this is a decision that determines the future of a major nation. Leaving it up to some man with suspicious origins is rather... Alliance Leader, what were you thinking?”

No matter how much she disparaged Rooney, he kept up his poker face. He had done his job, nothing more, nothing less.

“Leader,” Francisca said at length. “You must not give up on the dream of having this whole continent under the authority of the empire.”

“Originally, my goal was just to unite the northern half of the continent. In the north, there had been a war that continued for so long that nobody knew when exactly it had begun, and I had decided that I would put an end to it. That was where my battle started in the first place. You know that, don’t you?”

“I do. However, the reason why I submitted to you, who had continued to wage conflict, was—”

Francisca once commanded one of the most influential factions in the Dustour Empire, and she had decided to surrender and join the Great Spirit’s army for one reason: Nanatrij had once declared that she would erase ugly conflicts from this world.

“I’ve achieved my original goal. As long as *you* vanquish the rebel army gathering in Goldbeck, the north will truly be united. What’s there to complain about? I’ve done what we set out to do.”

“Is that...really what you think?”

“Each and every word of it. I’ve learned that if I continue with my plans to wage war with the south, the price will be steeper than we expected. I had only planned on moving forward with uniting the whole continent if the sacrifices would be minimal. Right now, the empire’s might is depleted due to prolonged conflict. If we keep pressing on, the people will become unhappy. The army led by Bardot is living proof of that. Because they were eyeing the south, the rebel forces became active.”

“That is pure sophistry. You have the might of the Three Musketeers right now, standing as the epitome of glory. It won’t be possible to bring the continent together under our flag at any time but the present. Or, are the rumors possibly *true*? The ones alluding to the Living Dead’s defeat in Zenelaus?”

This time, Nanatrij was the one to fall silent. Taking over for his master, Rooney finally entered their conversation. “It was not a complete defeat. That lich was purged, nothing more. That man is still in good health.”

There was a tone of ridicule in Francisca's voice. "Oh, I didn't notice you there, vanquished one. I never thought *you* would speak up in front of me, but more importantly... I never thought that the lich would be overthrown. Even if I killed it, that thing just would not stay dead."

This news was a bolt from the blue to Francisca. Francisca was on equal footing with Dreibach Steibelt, but even to her, he was a man whom she definitely didn't want to face on the opposite side of the battlefield.

Nanatrij joined the conversation once again. "The one who sent the lich to its grave was Eldred, the Great Spirit of Fire."

"Eldred is indeed a formidable enemy. I can see how the Living Dead could have lost if that thing had made an appearance. However...I still advise that we should make war with the south."

"I won't overturn my decision."

"But the one who made that judgment wasn't you, but that vanquished one over there, wasn't it? Yes, your favorite lost, but that's all. Bardot would probably abide by your ruling, but I am different. Unlike him and Dreibach, I do not have as much emotional attachment towards you, Alliance Leader. I shall take things into my own hands and use my methods to achieve my original purpose."

"Wait, where are you going?" Nanatrij asked.

"I shall remove the obstacles standing in the way of uniting the continent. For that, I shall head to the south and confirm what happened with my own eyes."

"Rooney..."

With just one word from Nanatrij, the assassin who had waged a heated battle with Slowe Denning in Huzak reacted. "Francisca, you should refrain from thoughtless and selfish actions," he warned, sensing the overflowing bloodlust from Francisca.

"Ah, and here I thought you were scared of talking to me. Was that not the case?"

Rooney fell silent once again.

“A loser could never block my path,” Francisca mocked.

At that exact moment, Rooney froze, almost as if he was a prisoner in his own body.

Nanatrij’s response echoed through the room. “It seems that you’ve forgotten just who exactly taught magic to a mere potion dealer all that time ago.”

“I could say the same to you, Alliance Leader. Have you forgotten how many kings of formerly great northern powers I’ve brainwashed and turned into puppets so they’d cooperate with Dustour? I cannot possibly give any weight towards your decision this time.”



“You managed to keep your silence in spite of her barrage of barbs. Pretty impressive. You’ve improved.”

The oppressive atmosphere dispersed and Rooney felt the tension leaving his shoulders. He almost wanted to praise himself for managing to stand his ground even while Francisca had been there, right before his eyes. Compared to the other two, the Dream Dealer Witch was the hardest to read of the Three Musketeers.

“I will not be provoked by cheap jibes. I know that she was originally a miraculous healer and the founder of the Potion Dealer Association... It is absurd that she used to be called the Healing Doctor, however. Master, why did you let such a dangerous woman join the forces of the empire?”

“Well, she had talent. Or maybe I should say that she had too much talent. Anyway, you mustn’t underestimate the extensive intelligence network that Francisca has access to from that group.”

In the north, an area stirring with constant conflict, water mages had formed a charity called the Potion Dealer Association. That woman was once a great water mage in that group with talents so outstanding that she was even nicknamed the Holy Mother. She was a legend in the flesh and was rumored to have manufactured over half of the water elixirs currently circulating around the continent.

“So, Rooney,” Nanatrij addressed him. “What do you think will happen?”

“The Dream Dealer Witch has used her magic to manipulate others, causing many countries in the north to collapse from within. If such a lethal woman were to go to the south, everything would be for naught. You should send out someone to pursue her, and perhaps...consider killing her, if things get to that point.”

“You think *he* has a chance of winning against her?”

“A chance of winning...? May I ask what party you are referring to?”

“You know who I’m thinking of.”

One boy came to Rooney’s mind. The mysterious youth who had disguised himself as a monster in Huzak. He was also said to have drawn out Eldred’s power to the fullest in Zenelaus and used it to defeat the lich.

“Not in a thousand years. He is a far cry from the witch in terms of skill as a mage.”

“Oh? You have a pretty low opinion of him, even though he was the one who defeated you.”

“Even though they say anything is possible in the broad expanse of the Dustour Empire, there aren’t actually any humans who have defeated Great Spirits. That woman just so happens to be the one who managed to drive away the Great Spirit of Wind based on her own merits. I could never imagine a mere mage surpassing that witch. However, to change the topic, Master, how should Goldbeck be dealt with now that the rebel forces are amassing there? Without the Dream Dealer Witch on-site, I believe her worshippers would have trouble containing the enemy solely by themselves.”

The territory of the Dustour Empire was immense. With rumors of Dreibach losing part of his power circling around, there were countries taking advantage of this opportunity to start a revolt. This was why Nanatrij had gone so far as to send the Dream Dealer Witch to squash them, but now it was all for naught.

To the Great Spirit of Darkness, the southern part of the continent was insignificant. If sending troops there caused the north’s foundation to shake, it would be meaningless.

“Good question...”

This issue was a particularly stubborn thorn in Nanatrij's side. Dispatching another spy immediately to Goldbeck would be useless. She had chosen the Dream Dealer Witch because her power had been the perfect counter to the priest there who was very likely to send the continent into a gravely dangerous situation in the future with his heretic ideologies.

She had wanted to take this opportunity to assassinate the priest of the rebel army, one way or another. Francisca had been slowly drawing closer to the priest, but she had now left her station on the front line. Without her, was there anyone else who had the skills to deal a devastating blow to the rebel faction?

Nanatrij sighed. "I'll head there myself to rain on their parade. That's our only option."

"Now that is a decision I would never have expected. To think that my master would take things into her own hands!"

"That aside... Rooney, I now have a little job I want you to take care of."

"I refuse. Stopping that witch is impossible with my abilities. I would rather not be brainwashed with a single word from her mouth."

"That's not it. My request is actually something different."

After the Great Spirit of Darkness spoke, the man known as the demon of Huzak could only groan.

"Do I look like a deliveryman? Though I must say that you have concocted a very intriguing plan, Master. Doesn't this mean that in the end, *you* are the one who is the most interested in him?"

However, the same could be said for Rooney, who was thrilled at the chance to meet the youth again.



Chapter 1: The Manor in the Denning Lands

One little pig, two little pigs, I counted.

This world before me was exactly like what my mind's eye would picture if I thought of a ranch filled with lush greens. And now there were ten little pigs, eleven little pigs...

The peaceful paradise filled with greenery was surrounded by a fence. However, one after another, little piglets would sprint with all their might and leap over it, and this paradise was now crammed with them.

Oh jeez, yet another newcomer. The farm's already practically bursting with pigs. Hey, if any more of you guys come in, this place is going to fall apart! And stop looking at me like that! Even if you snarl and snort at me, it's not going to change anything, you know!

I didn't speak a word as I watched on, sighing internally. *Yeah, I know; this is a dream. I'm a cool and rational guy who can always tell dreams apart from reality, no matter what situation I'm in.*

But hey, it's fine for me to indulge in this sweet, pleasant dream for just a bit more, right? Reality never fails to be cruel, so of course there would be times when I would want to escape to dreamland.

I heard a weak snort. A damned voice with no charm whatsoever. *Was that really a human's voice? I'm pretty convinced that was the sound of a real pig!*

"Oiiink..."

And, undoubtedly, it was my voice. It was I, who had crawled under soft, pristine white bedsheets, and I was letting out pathetic noises from within my hideout.

"Stop that, Young Master! Morning has already arrived!" a voice chided.

I wailed out several snorts of displeasure. "Please let me sleep just a little more! It's still nighttime to me!"

“What nonsense is that?! You have been sleeping as much as you please every day!”

“Oink oink!” I snorted in protest.

“How many times do I have to repeat myself before I get through to you?! Speak in human words! Unless you do, you would make a fool of yourself in front of our people! Come on out of your bed!”

“Noooink!”

A loud snap, and a hard impact on my head. She had smacked me!

Th-This woman actually dared to hit me! You sure about that? I might not look it, but I’m the direct descendant of House Denning, one of the greatest noble families in this country! Even if you’re hitting me through the bedsheets, it’s still painful, you know?!

“Young Master! Get out of bed!”

“Oiiink!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” I howled.

Damn! This old hag has done it again! The sheets were dragged away, and my squishy body was in plain sight for all to see. I let out a whimper in my mind. *I was wrapped up for a long time and all warm from that, but now my body temperature is...*

“Mallow! Give that bedsheet back! It’s mine!”

“Oh dear, you really have become such an unseemly sight... It pains your poor Mallow’s heart to see you in such a state...”

“Well, your heart can be pained as much as you like! More importantly, give me my sheets back!”

“You’re about the only one in House Denning who would be slacking off like this, Young Master. The world is heading off in a peaceful direction, and yet look at you...” Mallow sighed.

It was early in the morning, before sunrise, but this old woman was being extremely cruel to me at this ungodly hour. Her name was Mallow and she was a granny of a maid who had started serving House Denning long before I was even born. She was probably the only one in the entirety of the Denning lands

who could show such audacity to me, a direct descendant of House Denning.

“Hey! My sheets!” I insisted.

“Your lack of fitness had been so atrocious that our citizens even dared to allude to you as a human orc, but you came back to our lands looking like a brand-new person. I, your dear Mallow, was overcome with joy at the sight. But look at you now! You’re a hermit pig once again. What is putting you off this much? Young Master, are you going to avoid heading outside yet again today?”

I didn’t have a good reply to that.

Here in the Denning lands, I could enjoy the warmth of the sunlight and my clean bed. My days were tranquil without anyone around to disturb my peaceful sleep. These were all things I had yearned for, but right now, I was living like a hermit... No, that wasn’t it. I was in the middle of a strike of protest, refusing to leave my room.

I harrumphed, sulking. “You would never understand what I feel.”

After that intense battle in Zenelaus, my situation had turned completely on its head. *Where should I even start...? Uh, for starters, Zenelaus averted destruction. We narrowly avoided setting off the trigger that would start the war, since we were able to defeat Dreibach.*

“At this rate, Young Master... Wouldn’t it have been better if even one member of your family...for maybe just your grandfather to have stayed here in the Denning lands and kept you company?”

“Mallow... I’m sure you’ve seen what kind of attitude they have towards me. I’m a taboo person in this family. I shouldn’t even be here. Grandfather was the worst of the bunch, remember? To him, a grandson who has even one single failure on their record should no longer be a member of House Denning.” I sighed. “And here I was, celebrating my luck now that all the yapping people were gone and I could enjoy my peace and quiet... I didn’t think that you’d become this naggy too, Mallow.”

Since that incident, there have been two big changes in my life. And they were like giant meteors that crashed into my routine life and shattered it to pieces.

Before I start talking about the second change, I probably need to explain what happened first...

“But if you were together with your family, wouldn’t you have had the chance to redeem yourself?”

“Never. What could I do if I went onto the battlefield right now? I’d be nothing more than a speck of dirt on their boots, or they’d just use me in some way that profits them. Plus, they’re doing negotiations at the front lines now, not fighting. My very presence would simply be a hindrance.”

So this is just a rumor among the common folk and I don’t have concrete evidence to back this information up...but I heard that the Dustour Empire is slowly withdrawing their troops from the stalemate of a battlefront between the south and the north. When I first got wind of this rumor, even someone impassive like me jumped for joy.

The soldiers of the empire follow the orders of General Bardot, the head of military affairs there. He is one of the Three Musketeers and the self-proclaimed pious servant of the Great Spirit of Darkness that only answers to the Great Spirit herself. The sudden disappearance of troops from the front line means that Nanatrij must have been the one to call for retreat, which means that she no longer has the intention of starting a war, at least not in the immediate future.

“My, my, you might as well write me an entire speech at this rate. But I must argue one thing. Your family does not think that your existence is a hindrance. Even all your brothers were absolutely fascinated with you, weren’t they?”

I hesitated. “You’re the only one who sees it like that, Mallow. And let me make one thing clear: the war is going to end, and it’s going to end somewhere I don’t know. Thus, even if I lazily sleep my days away without restraint here, nobody will get mad.”

If everything proceeded on like this and the war fizzled out, it would be the best outcome I could ever ask for. It would prove that all my efforts hadn’t been in vain. Unlike in the anime, all those people wouldn’t be injured, and my tragic future would be avoided too.

From the bottom of my heart, I was glad that I had gone to Zenelaus. *I mean,*

think about it. The defeat of one musketeer was enough for me to bring the gift of peace to the whole world! Now I won't have to face General Bardot, whose Dustour soldiers are infamous for being more fearsome than monsters. I can also avoid battling the Dream Dealer Witch, who just loooves brainwashing people.

“And that’s why I’m going back to sleep, Mallow, and nobody is going to make me budge on that.”

“Young Master,” Mallow said chidingly, “your family is currently working very hard for the sake of the future of this country. And you’re...”

I paused when I heard that. “You probably don’t know this, but I was actually the one who created the opportunity for world peace to be possible. But I’m willing to bet that nobody would believe me.”

Mallow heaved a sigh. “This topic again? When you came back, you seemed so dignified, but look at you now.”

“It probably was a trick of the light or something... I haven’t changed at all. That aside, Mallow, how long are you planning on being a maid for House Denning? You’re probably around retirement age, or even past that.”

“Young Master, it is improper to ask a lady about her age.”

I blinked at that. “Well, you’re definitely no spring chicken. In the first place, it’s absurd for a remarkable mage like yourself to take on the job of mere maid just because my father was impressed. Oh come on, please go. I’m heading back to dreamland.”

“This is truly regrettable,” Mallow lamented.

Due to Dustour gradually calling back their troops, House Denning is overloaded with work since we’re responsible for military affairs in this country. My family has all gathered on the battlefield in the Grant Wetlands to glower at our enemies. As such, the only direct descendant inside the Denning Manor right now is me.

“I shall leave food on the table for you, Young Master. I am afraid I have to leave to take care of the children.”

“Pretty tough work, this early in the morning.”

“Please take your time with your meal. It will not grow legs and run away, after all.”

“...Whatever you say.”

And now, without any of the Denning members around, the one who ruled our house was this ancient maid. She was known as Mallow and was a commoner who had served us for a long time.

Despite her commoner status, she was a peerless mage and used to be my father’s private magic tutor. We were greatly indebted to her. I had also experienced her strict and extreme training when I was a child, and she was currently responsible for Charlotte’s education.

“Young Master, your Mallow prays that the day you leave your room will come soon.”

Seeing that she had finally left my room, I dived into my bed again.

“It’s all her fault,” I grumbled. “Thanks to her tedious ramble, now I’m wide awake.”

If I had to decide what the most significant change after the incident in Zenelaus was, it would be the fact that the war was no longer an immediate threat.

Sighing, I muttered to myself. “Whenever I talk to Mallow, I get flashbacks of my childhood fears, and those get in the way of me sleeping without a care in the world.”

This is just my guess, but I think this happened because the Great Spirit of Darkness loathed going into a long and messy war. Even in the anime, she ended up grumbling to herself when the war began to drag on. That was because of Shuya, who had Eldred on his side. She groaned with regret, saying that she shouldn’t have started the war in the first place since the Great Spirit of Fire was around.

In other words...Shuya going wild in Zenelaus and exposing his existence to

Nanatrij probably turned out to be a good thing. Nobody in this world is stupid enough to step on a tiger's tail that's in plain sight! I wouldn't have expected anything else from the Great Spirit who treasures the empire so much.

"The war has stopped...which means mission accomplished for me, but..."

Basically, I can pat myself on the back and cheer. The world is on the fast track to peace! Thanks, Shuya! You truly are worthy of being called the star of the anime! Now, all that's left for me is to work towards my own happiness!

Or, well, that's what I had thought. But what the heck is going on now?!

"Why am I back here...inside my family home...in the Denning lands...?" I wailed.

It was time to reflect on the second big change that happened to me after the fight at Zenelaus. We had returned from Zenelaus to find the queen of Daryth waiting for us. Her Majesty had praised me for protecting Kirsch Mage Institute, and I had thought that Charlotte and I would return to school quickly after that.

It would have been perfect timing since Kirsch had just finished polishing off its reconstructed campus, which meant that the holidays would end soon. But, well, I never got to return to Kirsch, because the queen herself had asked me to consider taking the position of Guardian Knight...

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?! Stop slacking off! If you keep that up, you'll end up running away from the military academy only one month into your training!"

"Who dares to look sleepy during drills?!"

"It is our duty to protect these lands during the absence of our lords and ladies in House Denning! This is a great responsibility! Do you not understand that?!"

House Denning was a ducal house in the Country of Knights and one of her most powerful noble houses. It was a stifling and troublesome place, and I was the third son of this lineage.

When I was a kid, there was a time when I was called grandiose nicknames, like "prodigy." Lately, I also started being often referred to by a new, epic title:

the hero who had saved Kirsch from a fearsome monster. *Yeah sure, that's great and all, but... The recommendation to become the next Guardian Knight still completely blindsided me! Who would have expected that?! I mean, this is the Guardian Knight we're talking about! I'm probably the furthest one could get from a knight!*

"Young Master! Please come ouuut!" a man yelled.

"Hey! You over there! Why are you shouting?!"

"The head maid Mallow told me to call for the young master from outside, so I did!"

"Young Maaaster!"

After I had been dragged back here to the Denning lands, I had been met with all sorts of reactions from my family.

For example, one of my older brothers couldn't bother hiding his irritation, perhaps thinking that I had wedged myself in to block his path to becoming the head of House Denning. Meanwhile, one of my younger sisters commended my actions earnestly. What surprised me the most, however, was the fact that most of my family had encouraged me to become the Guardian Knight. My father had been the only one to show his disapproval because he disagreed with the idea of a Denning joining the Order of the Royal Knights. Realistically, it was probably only a matter of time before the opposition overwhelmed him.

"So the drills have already started?" I muttered to myself. "Sheesh, they're a noisy bunch. They should know by now that I won't leave my room no matter how many times they call me, but they still..."

The sun peeked over the horizon outside my window, and I could hear more and more voices of people training outside.

In the courtyard of the Denning Manor, trainee knights were practicing their skills. This large cluster of people were talented commoners whom my family had taken under our wing.

"Young Master! Young Master Slooowe!"

When I first came back here, everyone who wasn't a Denning actually fawned

over me and pampered me. They were practically jumping with excitement, and I swear I wouldn't have been surprised to find them cheering, "Woohoo! The Prodigy of Wind is back, baby!" It was that crazy! People's treatment of me in the capital was quite noteworthy too, but that couldn't hold a candle to the people in the Denning lands.

That reminds me... My two older bros were pretty insistent that I become the Guardian Knight, almost desperately so. Well, if I become the Guardian Knight, they'd have a better chance at becoming the next duke, so... The Guardian Knight is a special position, exceptional even compared to the Royal Knights. The moment I choose to take on that title, I will no longer be a member of House Denning.

"I can't sleep with all this going on, so I guess I'll eat the breakfast Mallow prepared... Urk, beans everywhere." I groaned. "I miss breakfast at Kirsch... Now that I think about it, my food seems to have grown increasingly modest lately..."

I had asked the queen to give me time to consider the proposal. Declining outright would be very rude, so I had told her that I wanted to stew over it for a while. But then, my family just had to show up and assume that I would become the Guardian Knight, no questions asked!

House Denning has been distant with the Order for so long, but now that it's the position of Guardian Knight we're talking about, they completely changed their tune. Jeez, these guys have no scruples when it comes to what profits them, do they?!

"...Oiiink." I breathed out a whine.

But I won't go down without a fight against anyone who tries to turn me into a tool to further their own political gains! Thus, after I came back home, I announced privately to my family that I had no intention of becoming the Guardian Knight.

And, well, anyone could imagine the chaos that went down after that kind of declaration. They said that I should go outside first before trying to say that again, and they dragged me all over the place. Everywhere along the way, our people would talk to me with sparkles in their eyes, celebrating how amazing the new Denning Guardian Knight would be.

Hey, on that topic, how did the news of my recommendation spread so far that even the commoners in our lands knew about it?!

All this made me extra ticked off, so here I am, making myself into a hermit and eating like there's no tomorrow.

I snorted repeatedly as I munched on my food.

Just you wait; I'll become so round that nobody would ever think of talking about me becoming the Guardian Knight again. It's perfect timing too, since my whole family is away at the front line. They'd probably change their minds if they saw me fattened up like a plump ball. They'll realize that the title of Guardian Knight and me don't even belong in the same sentence!

Somebody was knocking hard on the door. "Master Slowe! You're awake, aren't you?! Madam Mallow told me that earlier!"

The banging on the door of the Forbidden Chamber persisted. My room had become so notorious that everyone was calling it that right now.

I stubbornly stayed silent.

"Master Slowe!" The visitor was just as unyielding. "You need to put an end to your solitary confinement! This has gone on for far too long! Please come out!"

Mallow was a commoner, but that didn't stop her from being an outstanding mage. She could easily break past my locking charms on the door like they were paper and barge into my room. However, now that none of my family members were here in this manor, nobody else could enter this room without my permission.

I didn't have to think twice about who was at my door at that moment. It had to be Charlotte, my retainer.

However, I was currently refusing her entry because Charlotte was the underling of Mallow, that granny from earlier.

"Master Slowe!" There was a pause. "Master Slowe, please come out!"

I had worked myself to the bone all this time for the sake of my own happiness. I had put in all that effort to create a plentiful future with Charlotte. But if I let the war happen while knowing that I could have done something

about it with my knowledge of the anime, the guilt would eat away at me. I had pushed forward hysterically to stop that from happening, at least.

And look at what I ended up with! I fought the urge to scream. Guardian Knight? I'll give that a big fat "No, thank you!"

"Master Slowe! This is your final warning! Prepare yourself!"

"Charlotte," I muttered reluctantly. "Don't you think you should give up already? It's impossible with your magic skills."

No offense, but a mage of Charlotte's level couldn't ever break in. She tried countless times, but overcoming that door is probably just an exercise in futility for her.

Still, this is so tragic. I thought that Charlotte would know me best and disagree, but even she has turned around and completely supported the idea of me becoming the Guardian Knight!

The Guardian Knight is thought of as the epitome of knights, and they dedicate their hearts and souls to the queen alone. This means that the moment I take on that title, my parting with Charlotte would be all but certain.

"Incoming!" Charlotte cried.

Immediately after that shout, I flew out of the sealed Forbidden Chamber. Or, to be more accurate, I was forcibly blown out of it.

It had been a long time since I last stepped outside my room, and with my abrupt appearance, I found everyone's eyes fixed on me.

I stomped down the carpeted corridor with loud thuds following each footstep. Maids and butlers—who were too macho for their own good—swerved to the sides to make way. They all stared at me with startled and disturbed expressions, but I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything else. I really *did* hole up for that long.

"Mallow! Can you hear me, Mallow?! Where are you?! I want to chat with you for a minute, so come on out!" I yelled.

"The young master has left the Forbidden Chamber!" a man exclaimed.

Another servant came up to me. “Young Master! Is there something wrong? You seem to be in a hurry!”

“Where is Mallow?” I howled. “That hag! What rubbish has she been teaching Charlotte?!”

“Madam Mallow is in the parlor. I hear that she is surveying some very important documents. Even if you are the young master, walking in on her at the moment would be—”

“Who cares?! I’m in a rush, and I need to see her *right now!*” I barked.

That aside, their reactions bring back so many memories... It’s like a repeat of what happened whenever I appeared on campus during my dark ages.

The only difference is probably how some of them also seem to have this compassionate look in their eyes as well, as if they’re watching something heartwarming. Well, there are a lot of people in this manor who watched me grow up, so that makes sense.

Feeling uneasy from their kind gazes, I opened the door that led to the parlor. There, I found the culprit responsible for whacking me out of my bed this morning. She was staring at a paper that was dense with writing, and her eyes were teary for some reason.

“Hello, Young Master. What has brought you here? When you breathe so heavily like that with your shoulders moving up and down, I can hardly tell you apart from a pig.”

Ugh, this hag keeps on saying stuff that makes me mad. What did she just call me? A pig? I know that better than anyone else, thank you very much!

“Mallow! What kind of things have you been teaching Charlotte?!”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Well now. Young Master, what in the world are you referring to?”

“That very Charlotte, who *you* are in charge of teaching, sent my door flying!!! What’s up with that?!”

I then unloaded the details of what just happened in my room.

Charlotte had exploded my door open with her magic. I had thought that I

was dreaming, but then I'd caught sight of Charlotte looking over the moon because of her successful spell. That expression on her face couldn't have been anything but reality.

"And that's not all! I had thought that Charlotte was going to apologize, but she ended up *celebrating* the success of her explosion! That's not the compassionate Charlotte I know! Mallow, what kind of wild things have you been pouring down her throat?!"

"I have only been giving that child very standard magic training."

"You call that *standard*?! Listen up—Charlotte's a light mage! When someone brings up light magic, people usually think about spells that buff physical abilities or distractions caused by dazzling lights; things along those lines! Teaching someone explosive and outrageous spells is nowhere near 'standard,' I'd say! Charlotte isn't a super-duper, uh, skilled mage or anything, so, you know, you really have to start by giving her a good foundation and all, or...you know!!!"

"I know that, yes. However, that child's talent is different from yours, Young Master. Whipping her up into a mage in her own right would require a unique curriculum, as well as a diversion from conventional ways, and thus I have done what I had to do."

House Denning was said to be the protector of the country of Daryth. The house we lived in was also referred to as the Manor of Generals, and I knew that people living in our lands looked upon us with profound respect.

But the truth isn't that glorious; the people of House Denning are just muscle-brained battle maniacs. Everyone loves magic and fighting. After all, since the moment we're born, we've all been continuously taught mantras like, "Become the most striking man on the battlefield!" or "Anything beneath first place is worthless."

I took a deep breath. "Mallow, when you say that, you're referring to a 'qualified mage' in the Denning definition, right? Requesting such a level of skill from Charlotte is unfair. Even if she doesn't become a standard mage in the eyes of House Denning, she has the potential to become a mage powerful enough for other houses to sing her praises. Don't you agree?"

“But Young Master, that child is still insistent on staying as *your* retainer, don’t you know that? And she still makes such a statement in spite of being far from the level required to be your retainer, especially now that you have changed.”

“I mean, you have a point, but...”

“But then again, since you are going to become Princess Carina’s Guardian Knight, you might no longer need a retainer.”

I stilled. “Who is going to become *whose* Guardian Knight?”

“Young Master. Do I have to repeat myself once again?”

My fate had all but changed on that day, at that exact moment when the queen of Daryth had given me that proposal.

Becoming the Guardian Knight of the next queen, Princess Carina, was a sublime future that anyone would dream of. However, I was completely against that idea, and nobody could convince me otherwise.

“Mallow, I have said this many times. I do not plan on becoming the Guardian Knight.”

“And I share the same opinion as everyone else. Young Master, you’ve been extraordinary ever since you were a child. You are a chosen one, someone who is fated to go on a path separate from the masses. You have overwhelming talent in magic, and you can also sympathize with the pain of others. Your fame didn’t stop at Daryth—it caused ripples in other countries, and an engagement with the princess of the powerful Cirquista even landed in your lap. I wholeheartedly understand why Her Majesty nominated you to become the Guardian Knight after you showed a change of heart.”

“Even when I look like *this*? Do you still think the same way after I became this fat again?”

“Everyone in House Denning knows that your current looks are nothing but camouflage. They say that one mustn’t judge a book by its cover, and that saying probably applies to you best.”

Damn it! I’m serious when I say that I don’t want to become something like

the Guardian Knight!

“It is an utmost honor. House Denning’s reputation would also become even more prominent.”

“Mallow, I don’t need stuff like honor. I...” *There are still so many things I want to do.*

“It is the destiny of all those born to House Denning. You were born into privilege as one of the most powerful nobles in this country, receiving a much more prestigious education and a higher standard of living compared to commoners. Thus, you have a duty. The nobles in this country as a whole place more importance on their dignity compared to those of other countries. Among them, House Denning is the one that follows this belief most religiously. That was the reason why I decided to serve this family until my death.”

My laugh was dry and forced. “Damn it all. Responsibility? To hell with that! Don’t force your dreams down other people’s throats. You know? I loathe that aspect of this family. I really do.”

Mallow paused. “I will pretend that those words were just the howling wind.”

Daryth’s Royalty of Light, House Denning, and even Charlotte wanted me to become the Guardian Knight.

So this is how I’ll end up, I thought bitterly. *It always turns out like this.*

It might be difficult to make my voice heard on this matter. After all, it was the will of Her Majesty.

“Wait, we’re going off topic. I came here to talk about Charlotte’s spell.”

From what I knew, Charlotte shouldn’t have known that kind of magic. *What kind of ridiculous things happened while I was hiding away from the world?*

“She said she would like to use it, and I let her.”

“But still, it has gone too far! Charlotte blew up my door, you know?”

“Ah, so she’s finally managed to get to a level where she can at least do that much.”

“Charlotte is a *light* mage! Don’t teach her weird explosive spells! That’s

pretty much magic running berserk!”

I didn’t want her to become a mage who tore down the rules of common sense.

Yes, I had locked my door to test Charlotte’s abilities in magic. If she used a spell to try to unlock it, the door would yield. *Yet she went ahead and destroyed the entire thing! This is nuts!*

“That is how we do things around here. In that case, perhaps you’d like to come out of your room and teach her yourself?”

I was stunned speechless.

It had only struck me *now* that I had truly returned to my family home. Reality came crashing down on me for the first time since I had arrived.

I stomped loudly through the manor.

Denning Manor’s grounds were expansive, and there were nearly a hundred maids attending to this house. About half of them were commoner mages, and the hag from earlier, Mallow, ruled over them all.

I’m starving! I didn’t get to eat breakfast in the end because Charlotte’s spell turned it all into a gooey mess with the rest of my room.

“Miss maid, you over there,” I called out. “Is there breakfast available?”

“Y-Young Master!” the woman stammered. “My deepest apologies; breakfast time has already passed, and...”

“Oh... Surely there are simple dishes to snack on, like, uh, you know, sandwiches or something.”

“My apologies... Head Maid Mallow has repeatedly emphasized that we should not spoil you after you come out of your room, Young Master.”

Am I hearing things? They were all awfully nice to me up until a short while ago!

Okay, I see what their strategy is. They went out of their way to spoil me rotten until I came out of the Forbidden Chamber and then became tough on me once I was outside. What’s up with that? Taking a page from an old fable like

The North Wind and the Sun?

A loud rumble interrupted our conversation.

“Did you hear that? That was my stomach,” I muttered.

“I am very sorry.”

“Okay, I get it... In that case, do you know where Charlotte is right now?”

“Oh, that young one? She should still be in your room...”

She was indeed still in my room. Charlotte stood there like a statue, zoning out in the center of my room, as maids cheerfully cleaned around her. *Hm? There's something off about her.*

“Charlotte?” I called out.

Charlotte whimpered back at me. “Master Slowe... My wand turned into dust...”

“Oh, that... I heard about that from Mallow. The spells she taught you aren't compatible with your wand. That kind of thing can happen sometimes, yeah.”

It was a wand made for light mages, after all. If she often cast spells that didn't suit her and were above her level, like explosions and berserk magic, this was bound to happen eventually.

Hm, but Charlotte's wand was pretty high quality, wasn't it? According to the rumors, since Charlotte succeeded in making me lose weight, she received a nice sum of pocket money... Oops, if I put it that way, she'd sulk. I mean, she was given a special bonus and she invested it all into a wand, but, well... She had probably attempted some extremely volatile spells.

At the same time though, in my family, there's a custom that says a mage will only be considered decent after breaking ten wands. And then there are those maniacs who declare that wands are consumables... Yeah, Charlotte really shouldn't stay in this kind of environment.

For the rest of that day, I consoled Charlotte, who was heartbroken about losing her wand.

“Rise and shine, Master Slowe.”

It wasn't that nagging old hag today; it was Charlotte's voice instead. *But why was Charlotte able to enter my room? I had locked my door with a...spell... Ah, I remember now. Charlotte blew the door to my room into pieces yesterday.*

I took a look and saw that the door was still missing, so anyone could break into my room as they pleased. *Mallow ordered them not to fix it because she doesn't want me to become a hermit again...*

I stifled a sigh. “Okay... I'll get up,” I grumbled groggily.

I rubbed my drooping eyelids. *I guess...I might as well go out a bit today, for the first time in a long time.* I was curious about what Charlotte had been up to during my shut-in period, as well as what led to her magic incident yesterday.



“Just curious, but, uh... What do you usually do every day, Charlotte?”

After listening to her describe her daily routine, I jumped to my feet in shock. Even if I were to put it mildly, the educational policies of this family were insane. I remembered how when I was still a toddler, I had been brought to a forest, told that I should gather my own share of food, and then left alone. Broken bones resulting from waving wands too many times was an everyday occurrence among the people here.

Charlotte continued. “A while ago, I was dumped deep inside the forest with only a knife on me, and I was told to survive for three days there...”

“You *what*?!”

“I thought I was done for at the beginning! But, well... Surprisingly, it was pretty manageable once I put my mind to it. I mean, I was in danger in Huzak too, so I thought that I needed to improve my survival skills.”

I shook my head furiously. “No no no, hold up a hot second! Living in Huzak was an *exception*, not the norm. I never, ever want a repeat of an infiltration mission into a place ruled by monsters.”

“Really? I, uh...I kind of enjoyed being there...”

“Wait, seriously?”

It was at that moment that I remembered Charlotte was actually quite resilient despite her looks.

“Life at Kirsch was a lot of fun, but there’s a lot I can and should learn in House Denning. Oh, and a while ago, I cooked a snake! It was delicious! I’ll make one for you sometime, Master Slowe!”

“Uh, you really don’t have to; please don’t. I will definitely and absolutely refrain from eating that, thanks!”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it, Master Slowe!”

I fell silent and then decided to switch the topic. “Charlotte, didn’t being alone in such a dangerous place bother you? There weren’t any classes like that at Kirsch.”

“It wasn’t bad at all! Usually, they bring me to even scarier places, so it was nothing in comparison.”

“I get it, Charlotte. I wholeheartedly understand everything now.”

“What did you figure out?” Charlotte asked as her eyes lit up, shining with excitement. “But I finally realized that the survival skills I’m learning here at House Denning will be useful to me in the future!”

It’s no good; she’s a goner. She’s been brainwashed! She subscribes to the family’s belief that even if she doesn’t have a wand, “let them eat fist!” Charlotte is too far gone. I wanted to put a hand to my forehead in despair. *Please, somebody, tell me that I’m dreaming!*

Charlotte rambled on and on. “I’m also considering volunteering to go along on an expedition. My wand is gone now, but there’s still probably a lot I can learn!”

No no no, I can’t let that happen! If I let her go on one of those, Charlotte is going to end up running even further down this outrageous path! Objection! Absolutely not!

“Charlotte, there’s actually a little favor I would like to ask of you... Could you pack my stuff for me?”

Being here would only warp Charlotte’s common sense even further. Right at that moment, my heart was set.

There was only one thing we could do. *Let’s go back to Kirsch Mage Institute.*

The Denning lands had thrived for a long time, blessed with flourishing flora and fauna carpeting the whole area. The sky was spotless and beautifully clear with not a cloud in sight.

I had wanted to take a breather to clear my head and think about things, but even a walk like this was enough to soothe my heart plenty.

“So, do I confront this problem head-on, or should I use my enemy’s weakness to my advantage? Hmm, my enemy is Mallow, though... Standard persuasion tactics wouldn’t ever make her go against my father’s plans. Now

then, what to do, what to do..."

I had holed myself up in my room, and now I was going to suddenly declare that I wanted to go back to school. I needed to come up with a good enough reason for doing so.

"One option is to secretly sneak out of my house without saying anything, but...it's probably too much."

Plus, even if we left home, Charlotte and I wouldn't have anywhere to go. Well, of course, we'd have infinite possibilities before us, like becoming adventurers, or private magic tutors, or mercenaries, but the most practical and realistic choice is returning to Kirsch. I also want to go back so that I can bring Charlotte back to normal, since she's been half-infected by the ways of House Denning... But even if Charlotte always takes my side on everything, she probably wouldn't approve of us leaving home in secret.

Well now, what should I do?

I muttered, "But how do I convince Mallow? She's as stubborn as a mule..."

There was only one way I could easily leave this place, and that was by successfully persuading the senior maid. However, this task was tougher than anything else, especially considering that my father wanted to reform me here inside the Denning territory.

In the middle of my stroll outside, people living on our lands began to gather and come up to me.

"Young Master! I heard about the rumors!"

"To think that the queen directly requested for you... It is almost like a dream come true!"

Gifted with fertile soil, the Denning lands had attracted many people from even outside our borders, and they came seeking a fruitful life. In these times, with rumors on the rise that a war could break out at any time, someone had once said that territories with higher military strength like ours were much more popular with migrants than lands with bustling economies.

"Uh, um, please wait, please, listen to what I have to say too!" I blathered out

to the crowd.

“I was lamenting the way things were going when I heard that the young master was going off to the mage school, but then I heard that you came back looking so dignified and brave! Though, well, you seem to have put on a little weight since then...”

“You! Watch the words that come out of your mouth when talking to the young master! The pressure of being the next Guardian Knight must be so immense that we cannot even fathom a sliver of it.”

I didn’t know what had excited them so much, but the citizens of Denning were looking at me with stars in their eyes. They started talking about the reality I loathed most as an accepted fact instead of just a possibility, and I wanted to shout at them to stop messing around with me! However, faced with such brilliant and admiring eyes, I wasn’t able to say anything to the contrary.

“Young Master! Are you really leaving to go serve the royal family?”

“Young Master! I heard in the rumors that you’re going to become the Guardian Knight!”

Everyone wholeheartedly believed that I was going to do so, despite the fact that I had no desire to at all...

Which begs one question: how did these outsiders learn about that? Maybe the rumors were started by one of my brothers since they think I’m in their way?

I heaved a sigh in my mind. Surely it’s obvious from the state of my body that I have no interest in racing my family to become the new head of House Denning. Even at this very moment, my brothers are probably running around the front lines in an effort to climb the ladder of success.

Charlotte chimed in. “Master Slowe, I also think this is a very glorious opportunity! This is the Guardian Knight we’re talking about! You’re perfect for the title, Master Slowe, and—”

“But Charlotte, I can’t even *use* swords, for one,” I argued.

“You can just practice! Knowing you, you’ll be fine!”

Charlotte was so enthusiastic about such a future, and...that was why I had

ended up turning to binge eating out of stress.

The Guardian Knight was someone who would charge across a battlefield all by themselves if it was the will of the queen. *Think about it rationally. It's the exact opposite of what one would expect from me. Seriously, how did it all come to this...?*

"Charlotte, could you call Mallow to my room?" I asked.

"Do you have business with her?"

"Yeah, a little."

"Understood!"

Now then, how do I persuade Mallow? In cases like this, even if I made an elaborate plan, it wouldn't work. That woman has so much life experience that I'm like a baby next to her. Even if I rely on cheap, superficial words, she'll throw them right back at me. But one way or another, we are going to return to Kirsch.

I began giving myself a pep talk. *Slowe, remember the scrumptious breakfasts over there? The food of nobles, a hundred times more delicious than anything served in this strict household. I'll have a room all to myself where nobody will disturb me, and no fussy granny maid to barge in as she pleases. On top of that, I won't be punched and smacked awake while I'm asleep!*

"Um, Young Master..." A maid called out to me. "Do you possibly have a moment?"

"What is it? I'm pretty busy... I'm about to have an important bout with Mallow, and my life is on the line for this match."

"You had a guest, Young Master."

"A guest? For *me*?"

"Yes. However, I was told that you did not have to meet him in person, and that passing on a message to you was enough..."

"What's with that?" I asked, my tone incredulous. "So what's the message?"

"Um... He said to be careful."

I waited for her to continue, but there was no more. *Huh? That's it?* I voiced

my doubts, and the young maid simply nodded. *That was the whole message? Jeez, that's really ominous and scary. It's like an advance notice from a criminal in a horror story!*

A guest coming to see me is a rare occurrence in the first place. Wait, are they an admirer or something? After that big uproar with monsters at Kirsch, there were plenty of people who declared that they became fans of mine, so it wouldn't be strange for me to have some inside the Denning lands... Oh, maybe they're trying to catch my interest by saying something intriguing.

"Okay, let's put the message aside for now... What was my guest like? Please tell me as many details about him as possible, like his age, his appearance, all of those."

"Well, about that... To use his words, the man called you 'an abnormal guy who disguised himself as an orc,' Young Master. I thought that I had heard wrong, but he left before I could even detain him."

Disguised as an orc...huh? I've never disguised myself as an orc in my whole life— Memories came rushing back, and I felt a large spike of shock pierce my body.

With a ding of realization, a certain man appeared in my mind...the guy whom I had met in Huzak.

I bit on my lip hard as I walked on without saying a word.

No way. That's impossible! Why would that guy contact me? And he even went through all the effort of coming to this place in person! Is that guy bored to death with too much free time on his hands or something?! Come on, there are so many other things he should be doing. The empire is coming to a big turning point. He should be busy as the minion of the Great Spirit of Darkness, and not doing something like this!

Isn't that right, Rooney?!

I snorted to myself indignantly.

Apparently, that bastard had brazenly introduced himself as a guest of House Denning to that maid. The young woman had no prior notice of such a person

coming today, but his demeanor had been so confident that she'd ended up believing him.

After realizing this, I described Rooney to the maids while leaving out any additional information. I then instructed them to report to me immediately if they ever spot that guy on these premises again.

But that guy was probably already long gone. This place was smack-dab in the middle of enemy territory to him. Plus, he himself had apparently said that he was only here to leave a message for me and that he would go back immediately, so he had probably already accomplished his goal.

Now, about that message...it's way too hard to understand what he meant. I went silent as I pondered its meaning.

The Dustour soldiers were pulling back from the battlefield without a hitch. I had also heard behind the scenes that an envoy from Dustour had arrived in the south. The empire was definitely beginning to drag its feet about starting a war. So why would Rooney give me a warning now of all times?

Ugh, I have no clue at all! Even in the anime, that guy was a total mystery! He constantly gave advice to Shuya on how to become stronger, even though Shuya was his enemy.

Be careful, he says... Does that mean someone's life is in danger? If that's the case, one person comes to mind. It's gotta be that guy, Shuya.

The Great Spirit of Darkness has discovered Eldred, who had been controlling him. In the anime, the Great Spirit of Darkness tried to kill Eldred and Shuya countless times, so that would make sense. In general, Great Spirits don't get along with each other, and the relationship between Nanatrij and Eldred is the worst of them all. Usually, when they encounter each other, they end up fighting battles so grand that they make new marks on history.

But, well...it's not like Shuya is important to me or anything, so...

A voice interrupted my disorderly, chaotic thoughts. "Young Master, what was it that you wished to talk about?" The heroic older woman entrusted with the Denning Manor, Mallow, had finally come up to me.

Uh-oh. Damn it, I haven't thought enough about how I would persuade her at

all. At this point, I had no choice but to make up something on the spot.

In my family's absence, my father had given Mallow full authority over all of House Denning's affairs. She was cool, calm, and collected. Coupled with her unfaltering, impassive aura, she had traits that only a veteran with years of experience under her belt could display.

She was busier than anyone else was every day, and I didn't even know when she found time to sleep. However, she would immediately come rushing over to me like this with just one summons from me.

"Mallow, there's something I want to talk about."

"I expected as much, Young Master. After all, I heard that you had been calling for me for some reason. Quite a few days have passed since you've come out of your room. However, from the expression on your face, it seems that you have come to some sort of decision."

"Yeah, I've finally made up my mind. I..." I hesitated before finishing my statement. "I'm planning on returning to the mage school."

My father's opinion on Kirsch Mage Institute was that I was wasting my time there. However, Mallow seemed to have anticipated my declaration to some extent and didn't reject me outright.

"Young Master, do you feel uncomfortable in your family home?"

"Not at all. I just think that this place isn't where I'm supposed to be right now."

"My, what a surprise. I thought that you would say that you felt repulsed by this place altogether."

"Well... I *do* think that there should be due punishment for the person who spread nonsensical rumors to the Denning citizens. You know, the one about me becoming the next Guardian Knight? But other than that, I don't really have any complaints."

"Your grandfather is the one who spread that rumor. He probably hoped for you to become self-aware as a noble."

“That’s absurd. If I took up that post, I’d end up cutting all ties with this house. My name bringing glory to House Denning? Hah, not even in a thousand years! Mallow, surely you’ve realized this too. Even though my father might stand up for me, I have a big, black smear on my record and nothing can change the fact that I’m a nuisance here.”

That’s right. I’m way too infamous to help House Denning. On top of that, there’s always the risk of me eating my way to becoming a human orc once again. I’m volatile, and my family probably sees me as a hindrance. That’s why they immediately latched onto the offer of Guardian Knight when they heard about it, to get me out of the way.

“I don’t belong in this house. But when I’m at Kirsch, I feel at peace with myself. My personality taking a slight turn for the better might also have been because I was in a different environment.”

“Young Master...”

Well, I’m saying all this in a sorrowful tone, but in truth, all of this is just me reaping what I had sown.

I don’t want to be in this place, surrounded by enemies. That’s why I’m trying to appeal to Mallow and telling her that I want to go back to Kirsch. It’s the secret art of using my tears to get my way.

“If I’m at Kirsch and away from all this clutter, I can also take the time to properly consider becoming the Guardian Knight. Over there, the gossip probably isn’t as widespread compared to here, so I should be able to think about it in peace.”

“Young Master, your Mallow has watched over you for longer and more closely than anyone else. You are a son to me.”

“I know. You were the only one who was always on my side no matter what happened. That’s why I’m making this request to you.”

Despite her seemingly harsh ways, Mallow had always supported me. She knew everything there was to know about me. She knew all about the time when I was called the Prodigy of Wind, and then my rebellious phase, and when I had become a human so hopeless that rumors had spread beyond the borders

of my country.

Mallow fell silent.

All righty, things are looking good so far! If this keeps going smoothly, she really might give me permission to go back to Kirsch!

Honestly, this is my first and last chance to return to school. After my family comes back from the battlefield, there's no way they would ever let me go back to Kirsch. Nobody could ever win against those guys in terms of stubbornness. In other words, if I want to go back there, I need to persuade Mallow right here, right now.

"I will not permit it."

I fought down a sigh. I guess I expected that. I really did, but hearing Mallow announce her verdict so clearly makes me pretty sad. Haaah... It's all over. I've already tried every plan possible. Well, I mean, it's not like I put in enough thought to call these ideas plans exactly, but...I was way too underprepared to come up with something that could convince Mallow. My words have no credit in the first place, and persuading her with my standalone opinions wouldn't have ever worked.

I'll probably end up locked away in the Denning lands until my family returns, and everyone will keep trying to persuade me to become the Guardian Knight after that. Ugh, just the thought of it makes my appetite disappear.

"A slight change of topic, however... Do you know about the Young Master Reports?"

I blinked. "The what?"

"The Young Master Reports."

"Wh-What are *those*?"

"They're detailed, written articles about your everyday activities at Kirsch Mage Institute, Young Master."

Wait, hold up a minute, what the heck?! They're literally stalking me? Not only that, but the stack of papers on Mallow's desk was so thick that it was nearly a meter high, hinting at an extremely monumental work. Still, even if

that's the case, this is too much!

I hesitated. "Uh, Mallow, by any chance, did Charlotte..."

"Yes, she sent these here from school."

Oh yeah, Charlotte used to spy on my school life every day back then, didn't she? When I first enrolled, it was obvious that she was observing me. Gradually she became better at peeping, though, and somewhere down the line, she became discreet enough to not bother me at all.

But who would have thought that they named these the "Young Master Reports"? I...really don't want to see what's in them!

"These documents include highly classified information and only selected people can survey them, even among members of House Denning. In fact, I was only allowed to read these after you came back, despite my station."

How tasteless! Is my privacy nonexistent to them or something?

"I thought I was hallucinating when I first read these. It seems that you started off doing the same song and dance when you first arrived at Kirsch, repeating your behaviors in the Denning lands. However, that child wrote in these Young Master Reports that you suddenly changed one day."

Okay fine, I get it, so stop calling it that! Just the sound of it makes me feel so restless.

"Long ago, when I only knew what you were like before you went to Kirsch, I would have never believed that you made friends at school. However, once I read these, I changed my opinion. With that in mind, please let me ask you this question once again. Young Master, why are you so intent on going back to the mage school?"

"I made friends at Kirsch, and I haven't even gotten to bid them farewell."

Since Mallow had also been my father's magic tutor, she was getting up in her years, but the way she held herself didn't feel worn down by age at all. Subconsciously, my back also straightened, following her example.

I continued. "I want to go back because there are still a lot of things I've left unfinished over there."



I snorted between pants.

“Master Slowe, what’s with all the rush?”

“Charlotte, we need to pack.” I snorted again, breathing heavily. “We gotta be fast.”

“Huh?”

Sometimes, momentum and passion were important. A simmering emotion boiling over or an unstoppable impulse were the kinds of things that could melt an obstinate heart. Even if I spent my time going around in circles within my mind, it would only be a waste. I had truly learned how wonderful and powerful momentum could be after my conversation with Mallow.

Charlotte hesitated, then asked, “Are we heading out? I haven’t heard about such plans at all...”

I cackled smugly. “Where do you think we’re going?”

After all, I probably didn’t even have a single percent chance of success at persuading the old maid. My wish to return to Kirsch was the direct antithesis of the ways of House Denning, and it was nothing other than a self-indulgent request. However, Mallow had accepted my proposal, and the reason for that...was what I decided to call the Charlotte Reports. *Mallow’s name for them is way too embarrassing to use!*

“Ah, I see! Master Slowe, you’re going to follow me to the bandit forest training today, aren’t you?”

“Training?! Charlotte, were you planning on challenging a new intensive course again?! You could go on one of those at any time! I’m talking about something completely different! Okay, so I was talking with Mallow earlier, and she gave me permission to do something.”

“Permission? Is it something to get so excited about?”

“Of *course*! I’m really excited about it!”

Mallow had finally nodded in agreement all because of the journals about my daily life compiled by Charlotte. Apparently, the maid had stayed up all night

last night to read those papers without stopping. *I'm dreading to think how much she wrote in those Charlotte Reports. Was there really anything in my school life that was actually good enough to pass on to other people?*

Mallow asked me whether I would like to skim through them a little, but I firmly declined. Why would I ever stoop low enough to read about my own school life?!

"Oink! Oioioioink!"

"Master Slowe, you've pumped your fist in the air several times now. Why are you so happy?"

I snorted as I snickered. "You really wanna know?"

"I really do! Please tell me! It's the first time I've seen you do that while packing your bags!" Charlotte's eyes sparkled. "What kind of amazing place are we heading off to?"

How can I be anything but happy? I'm so ecstatic that I might jump for joy. After all...

"Charlotte! We're going back to Kirsch Mage Institute!"

Chapter 2: The Newly Appointed Professor

I listened to the rhythmic rattling of wheels as I sat in the carriage, my body wobbling along with the frequent jolts as I thought back to my days during my withdrawal.

The Denning lands were indeed my home, but that didn't change the fact that I had been constantly on edge while I was there.

My trip back home had only yet again affirmed the fact that the ways of House Denning just weren't for me. Pretty much everyone in House Denning had one thought in mind that guided them forward: they were born with a duty to protect this country. I simply wanted a future where I could be the happiest, but to them, even the thought of such a thing was taboo. *That just isn't my cup of tea. I don't like that way of thinking at all.*

I mean, sure, we are a powerful noble family and we can live privileged lives compared to commoners. But thinking that we mustn't achieve happiness because of that? Ridiculous, I say!

"Oink, oink," I muttered to myself.

Next to me, Charlotte was completely quiet, sleeping like a log. There was a book on her knees. The title was... *Let's see, Qualifications That Will Earn You Money. Huh. Well, just moments ago, she was so enthusiastic about raking in cash like a madwoman at school. I know she's trying to build a new wand fund, so that makes sense.*

"Hey there, young lad! We will soon arrive at the mage school," the coachman called out to me with a drawl in his voice.

I oinked back in response.

We were on a road lined by a magnificent forest on both sides. We were getting pretty close to Kirsch at this point.

This was the land of new beginnings, where I had left behind the blackhearted Piggy Duke and turned into the improved, earnest Piggy Duke. A wave of

emotion washed over me and I basked in my memories. Suddenly, the carriage jolted hard, perhaps running over a rock or something.

Charlotte opened her eyes and was now awake and alert. “Master Slowe?”

“Morning, Charlotte. We’re nearly there.”

Charlotte stretched with a groan. “Okay. But please make sure you put in the effort to lose weight again when we get back to school, you hear that?”

“You’ve already said that to me a hundred times,” I complained.

“Madam Mallow has told me to keep an eye on you and make you go on a diet! Don’t forget that the condition for returning to Kirsch is that you lose weight, Master Slowe!”

“You’re such a worrywart, Charlotte. I’m the man who managed to transform from my state in those dark ages to a slim and fit guy, remember?”

It seemed that before our departure, Mallow had repeatedly emphasized to Charlotte that my body shape must change, and now my retainer was fired up about it.

However, there was something just as important as weight loss to me. Rooney had come all the way to the Denning lands to leave me a message, and I needed to see if there was any truth in it.

Which reminds me... Did that guy really just leave me a message and go back to the empire immediately afterward? He isn’t hiding out there somewhere, is he? I really don’t want to come across him in such a shocking turn of events...

“Master Slowe! Please take a look!”

“Oiiink!” I exclaimed.

It was hard to describe the rush of emotions that welled up within me when I saw the familiar gates. It felt as if I had returned to my *actual* home. *Heck yeah! Now I can happily slack off every day again. In House Denning, people would pick on me no matter what I did. “Stand up straight,” they’d always say. Who cares about that?*

And now, I’m finally back at Kirsch Mage Institute after all this time! If not for the queen offering the position of Guardian Knight to me, I could have come

back to Kirsch immediately.

I'll be honest. My despair when I was forced back to the Denning territories was immeasurable.

"This is a promise, and you must, *must* keep it, okay? Unless you lose weight properly, you can't become the Guardian—"

I cut her off. "I get it, I *get* it, Charlotte. I know what you want to say!"

We passed through the gate, and a whole new world lay before our eyes. Even the walls around the perimeter had been renovated and looked brand-new. *I wonder how many people were needed to work on all of this.* The school as I remembered it had been utterly destroyed by monsters. Not a single area of Kirsch had been spared during the siege, and I had heard that the school had spent a fortune to repair the battered campus.

I could see the changes everywhere. One could easily tell how much love and care the affiliated craftsmen had put into the reconstruction.

I fell silent at the next moment. It seemed that nobody had noticed my return yet. *To be frank, I was pretty worried that there would be a huge uproar because of my reappearance at Kirsch, you know?*

But most of the students are in the middle of class right now, and the grounds are empty... Yeah, that makes sense. In that case, that's just how it is! I cackled internally. *But I know exactly what's going to happen next!*

"It's Lord Denning..."

"Our glorious Lord Denning has returned!!!"

Something like that, at least! The students will rush over to me after they leave their classrooms! There'll be an uproar as if a hero has made a valiant return. Heh heh, it was pretty crazy back during the monster incident, so I won't be surprised. Whenever people saw me, they'd rush over and ask me to teach them magic, or ask for my autograph, or to take them on as a disciple.

Basically, I can expect people to act just like they did after I slew the dragon, yeah? Oh boy! Should I maybe take on one disciple after all?!

I snorted and snickered to myself as my mind ran wild.

“Ah, Master Slowe, it looks like class has just ended.”

I could hear the tolling of the bell that signaled the end of lectures. *Oh? Is the parade for the return of the hero going to start now?* I cackled in my mind, convinced that I knew what would happen next. *That’s right, everyone’s going to fawn over me, just like back when I had protected Kirsch.*

However, reality wouldn’t be so kind.

A student stared at me in trepidation. “Hey, that guy is...”

Nobody approached me. In fact, everyone was keeping their distance and they were clearly spooked. *Huh? What the hell is going on? Why are they looking at me like that? Uh, it seems like they’re all scared of me...*

Standing next to me, Charlotte also looked perplexed. “Master Slowe, everyone has this really weird look on their face. Did something happen?”

Huh...? Why? I thought helplessly.

Before I knew it, night had fallen and the day had ended without anything of note happening.

Right now, I was gazing at the campus from the fourth floor of the men’s dorms at Kirsch Mage Institute. There was solitary silence in my room.

Even though I drifted around the school suggestively, there was no uproar, no fanfare, and nobody started screaming about the return of the awesome Lord Denning.

Hm? What about Charlotte, you ask? After we had arrived, Charlotte’s friends had immediately taken her off somewhere. I hear they were going to give her a tour around the places that had changed after reconstruction. I politely declined because I wanted Charlotte to have fun, you know? How nice, I thought, slightly sourly. Charlotte has some really kind friends.

In other words, my expectations had been completely smashed into smithereens.

“Oink...” I snorted dejectedly.

Who could blame me for whining like a pig? I mean, think about it! Nobody,

absolutely nobody visited my room! Not even Valjean, who I thought was my friend, nor Shuya, who owes me big time!

So it was all a delusion on my part, huh. You know, I told Mallow that I had many friends here who were all waiting for me to come back. Think about how I feel, having announced that triumphantly to her, then facing all this!

How could they ever do such a thing...? Guys, you all live in the same dorms as me, don't you? The stairs are right there. You could just climb up a few floors and you'd find yourself right at the door of my room.

"This is awful. They're all awful..." Muttering to myself, I headed towards my bed.

Only the soft bed welcomed me with open arms like always, unchanged after all this time.

My return to Kirsch Mage Institute yesterday had been the stuff of nightmares. Thanks to that, I had a terrible dream.

It featured the original fate of the blackhearted Piggy Duke. Unneeded by everyone, I was left to shrivel away all by myself. In the end, I turned into a malnourished pig, all skin and bones, and then passed away unceremoniously. That was worse than the anime's tragic end! I never turned over a new leaf in the show, but didn't I try really hard in this lifetime? For everyone's sake? It was also all thanks to me that the war was nipped in the bud, you know?!

I gloomily snorted under my breath.

I was in the worst mood I could possibly be in. I headed towards the dining hall, and a big uproar broke out as everyone looked at me. *Ah, no, this doesn't count as an uproar. There's no sound. The moment I entered the dining hall, all conversations stopped immediately. I couldn't help but jump a little in surprise when I came in. I mean, everyone reacted as if an orc had come in instead, so how could I not? So, uh, everyone's frozen stiff, so...* Since they seemed to be treating me like an actual orc for some reason, I shrank into myself and tried sitting down at a vacant seat.

The next moment, there was movement next to me and I realized that

someone had been sitting there. This upperclassman was quite burly and looked as if he was the tough type, but he stood up and put away his plate in a hurry, despite the fact that his food was still unfinished.

“Oink...” I muttered dejectedly.

Nobody sat near me. *What the heck? What is going on? Did I become the blackhearted Piggy Duke again? Has all my hard work vanished? Have I returned to the starting point?* I wanted to shout out loud that the empire had begun to withdraw their troops all thanks to my blood, sweat, and tears! This urge simmered within me as I continued to wait for a maid to bring over breakfast.

Oh, it's no big deal. You know, I'm used to this! In my dark ages, this was perfectly normal. Ah, maybe that's not very accurate. Back then, I never went through all the effort of coming to the dining hall to eat. I used to have my meals delivered to my room via the Charlotte Post.

But you know... It still hurts, you hear me? I'm only human after all.

“Aaah!!!”

There was a long and loud scream. *Keep it down, will you?* It was a shrill voice and had a certain pitch that pained my yet-to-awaken mind in the early morning.

What was that all about? I'm thankful that this voice blew away this silence, but... If that reaction was a shriek of horror in reaction to seeing me or something like that, even a big guy like me would break into tears. What in the world did that person see anyway? A ghost? Or were they shocked senseless because I'm here in the dining hall even though I'm not supposed to be here?

“Lord Denning is here!!!”

Wait, that voice... “Oink?”

The owner of the voice continued, unable to withhold their excitement. “It's you, Lord Denning! It's the real deal!!!”

It was Tina. *Ah, that's right. You were here too! She is both a genuine friend close to my heart and my first magic disciple, and she's calling for me. It's not a trick of the wind, is it? It's not a ghost, right?*

I looked at the person running over to me. She had black hair and a copious chest that bounced up and down as she approached. If she had a tail, it would be wagging around frantically like a puppy's...

"Lord Denning! I heard that the queen *herself* asked you to become the Guardian Knight! Is that true?!"

The moment those words left her lips, the sound of shattering dishes echoed throughout the dining hall. Maids started bumping into each other, and male students just a few seats away from me suddenly began to tremble. *Huh? Why are they reacting like that?* Everyone's eyes honed in on me. I wasn't joking, that was literally what happened. Right then, at that very moment, everyone acknowledged my existence. It seemed that I wasn't a ghost after all.

A commotion had broken out.

"So that rumor *was* true...?"

"That girl. She's a commoner, right?"

"Considering her status, I'm surprised she even dared to talk to the guy who'll be the next Guardian Knight."

"Hmm, wasn't that girl on good terms with Denning a while ago?"

"Wait, that wasn't a fib?"

"But my father said that..."

"Denning...is going to be the Guardian Knight!"

"Hold up, didn't they say that rumor is groundless...?"

"Someone go ask him!"

"No way! He might actually become the Guardian Knight, you know?!"

"There's too much of a difference in status."

"Just talking to him might be discourteous."

"It's the Guardian Knight we're talking about. *Guardian Knight!*"

"If we did something out of line and soured his mood... The risk is too high."

Huh? I could hear whispers everywhere. *Just so you know, I have good ears. In*

fact, you could even compare me to a bat! I was also curious about what everyone was talking about, so I went out of my way to use magic to enhance my hearing even more so I could hear everyone's reactions clearly. As a result of that...

"Lord Deeenning! Is it true that you're going to become the Guardian Kniiight?" Tina yelled.

"Uh, wait a moment... Please wait, Tina. Come over here."

I finally understood what was going on. The reason why everyone kept a distance from me was definitely because of *that*.

"Actually, forget that, I'll head over there," I said. "For now, I'm calling off breakfast...albeit reluctantly."

After I left the dining hall, I was led to the foot of a newly constructed building in the central square of the campus.

A massive clock tower stood before me. I rubbed my eyes several times, but it didn't seem like they were playing tricks on me. "T-Tina, what's this? This wasn't here before, was it?"

I had asked Tina to bring me to a quiet place without people, and this was where we had ended up. The path before my eyes led to an awfully impressive clock tower. It was surrounded by flower beds that housed plants blossoming in a variety of colors, neatly arranged at regular intervals. These seasonal flowers were in full bloom, adding a splash of lively color to the world.

I hadn't noticed this place when I arrived at school yesterday, but I was pretty sure that we didn't have anything like it before.

"Lord Denning, did you know that this place is a popular confession spot by now? And now, you have led me here..." Tina gasped. "Oh my, am I perhaps going to hear a declaration of love right now?"

"Oink?!" I shrieked. "No, it isn't like that! Hey wait, you were the one who brought me here, not the other way round!"

Tina giggled. "Yep, I know!"

“At any rate, let’s put that aside for now.” I grabbed Tina’s shoulders firmly and asked, “So, Tina, why do you know about that rumor?”

Tina yelped, taken aback.

Mind you, information about the Guardian Knight offer is absolutely confidential, top secret! Why would Tina, a commoner, know about that? She even knows that the queen addressed me directly about the matter... Even the commoners in the Denning lands didn’t know that part! Everyone present there was supposed to keep quiet about what happened until I gave a reply to the queen, so how...?

“Lord Denning, you...you have a really scary expression on your face.”

“Ah, sorry... I got spooked.”

“But since you reacted that way... Is that rumor perhaps *true*?”

I hesitated. “I don’t intend on commenting on it, but does everyone at school know?”

“But of course! Right now, the hottest topic at school is that you might become the Guardian Knight! In fact, there was a riot yesterday! Quite a number of the great nobles were, well... They were fighting over who would ask you about the truth of that rumor first, Lord Denning!”

“So everyone is avoiding me because...”

“Because the nobles are keeping each other in check! After all, if they got close to you, it would go a super long way, wouldn’t it? It seems that nobody was able to go up to you yesterday though. But I was curious about it too, and well...since no one seemed to be planning on talking to you, I ended up charging forward without thinking earlier.”

O-Oh... That’s what happened. So it was all a misunderstanding on my part...

Still, Tina, you’re an amazing girl. To think that you were able to charge right at me, despite the fact that I left even Daryth nobles quaking in their boots!

Tina continued. “But Lord Denning, this is just a passing thought, but... Haven’t you put on a little too much weight?”

After parting with Tina, I got actual proof of what she had said. It was just like when Princess Carina had visited Kirsch and I had been suddenly attacked with an onslaught of questions. It seemed that the noble students had been dying to ask me about the authenticity of my rumor. Apparently, they had all wanted to go first, but at the same time had been worried that the first person to ask might invoke my anger. And now, since a commoner girl had asked me the question in a voice loud enough so everyone could hear...

“Master Slowe, it’s completely different from yesterday! You’re the most popular person in town!”

“Everyone’s just curious at the novelty of it all, Charlotte. It’s not that I’m *actually* popular.”

Of course, I had denied everything related to the Guardian Knight offer. Those things were all lies. I hadn’t even given an answer to the queen in the first place! I just wanted to snort indignantly at them all.

The queen’s offer would be realized the moment I nodded my head. If I turned it down, the very fact that she had done such a thing would probably be erased from official records.

I turned to my retainer. “So, Charlotte, what was my next class again? It was, uh...”

“Jeez! Please get yourself together!”

A few days had passed since I had returned to Kirsch and I felt that my quiet, everyday life had finally come back to me.

A voice called to me as I was heading off to class. “Huh? Oh wow, really? So I don’t need my eyes checked? I was right! It’s you, Lord Slowe!”

I could swear that I had heard that voice somewhere before, and my hunch was proven right when I saw a young man with an extremely familiar face with blond hair and blue eyes. It was the guy who had become my first friend after I had transformed into the earnest Piggy Duke.

I felt a wave of nostalgia wash over me. It felt as if I hadn’t seen him in years!

“So it was you, Valjean! I thought you had died during the monster incident, but you were alive, huh.”

“That is such a terribly sinister way to begin a conversation. I am indeed alive and kicking, thank you very much.”

That reminds me, this guy wasn't in the queue of people waiting to ask me questions either, even though he seems like the type to be the first to arrive at such events. After all, he wants to become a Royal Knight himself, believe it or not, and... Huh? Wait, he looks a little sick. His face is as white as chalk.

“A-Are you okay? Are your wounds from the monster attack still wearing you down?”

“My wounds from back then have healed long ago,” Valjean said slowly. After barking out a short, dry laugh, he continued, “but it has been a week since I last came to school. It seems that I’m the number one patient at the infirmary after it reopened.”

“Who did this to you?”

“Wanting to test my skills, I challenged the new professor, and as you can see, I found myself beaten to a pulp...” Valjean Greatlorde smiled weakly.

A new professor? Who in the world are they? Oh right, a considerable number of the teachers are new faces too, just like the campus. A lot of the older, more elderly professors were replaced with young ones.

“A new professor came to replace Professor Loco Moco. This time, it’s a *real* Royal Knight, currently on active duty.”

“Hey, don’t put it like that; it’s rude to Professor Loco Moco...”

Valjean continued and told me exactly what had happened. Professor Loco Moco had overexerted himself to rebuild the campus as an earth mage. He had then thrown a fit, demanded that the headmaster give him a vacation, and his wish had been granted. Currently, he was enjoying a momentary respite.

Then, during one of the new professor’s classes, Valjean had challenged the professor to a spell duel. Unfortunately, Valjean had been crushed like an ant, resulting in him being hospitalized in the infirmary for a while. *This guy did what*

though? Against an active Royal Knight, no less?

“So, that professor who has taken Professor Loco Moco’s place... What are they like?”

There was no answer.

I furrowed my eyebrows. “Hey, why are you so quiet all of a sudden?”

“Let’s just say that I now understand exactly why a free-spirited person like Professor Loco Moco didn’t fit in with the Order of Royal Knights. By the way, um...a slight change of topic, but is that rumor true? That you are...”

“That story’s completely false,” I insisted. “Think about it, there’s no way the queen would ever directly ask someone like *me* to become the Guardian Knight, right?”

Just like that, I had made my comeback to Kirsch Mage Institute. My time back on the Denning lands had felt both too long and quite short, but thankfully I was able to put that episode out of my mind. If possible, I wanted to stay here on campus straight through graduation.

Lately, whenever I passed Charlotte in the corridor or on other parts of the campus, she would throw out sharp, biting criticisms my way.

“Master Slowe! Look at that! Your button is hanging on by a thread!”

On another day, she had cried out, “Master Slowe! Be more dignified! You look like a hunchback right now! And I also heard that you asked for seconds at breakfast this morning! That means you get one less dish than normal at dinner!”

I knew that Charlotte wanted me to lose weight, but... *Right now, there’s something else that’s more important to me.*

I started to listen to the chatter around me on campus.

“The Piggy Duke has gotten pretty round.”

“That rumor was probably just false in the end.”

“Think about it, how could such a glutton become the Guardian Knight? There’s no way he could ever be good enough.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Just the thought of someone snorting all the time becoming our Guardian Knight makes me shudder.”

“His retainer has been picking at his habits constantly, but he’s still like that. Does he have no shame or something?”

All right, all according to plan. Everyone has started to be disappointed in me again, just like what I wanted. You see, I wanted to erase the stupid rumor that I was going to become the Guardian Knight, and I thought that showing my indulgent lifestyle would give me the best results.

I snorted to myself, pleased.

It was so peaceful. Anyone would agree that Kirsch was calm once more. Sure, there was that warning from Rooney after he had gone through all the effort of coming to the Denning lands, but nothing seemed to connect with it in the present. There didn’t seem to be anything off, so I decided that for now, I would continue to enjoy my school life.

Though I felt a little bad about it for Charlotte’s sake, I hadn’t and *couldn’t* put any effort into losing weight.

I hummed and snorted to myself in Magic Studies class. As always, I had set up camp at the farthest end of the classroom. Seated diagonally and several rows ahead of me was Shuya. However, unlike usual, Alicia was absent from his side.

But this wasn’t exactly unexpected, per se. This had happened in the anime too. Since Alicia hadn’t gone back to her country during the long holiday, she was currently being chewed out hard about it. *It’s just like how I had been confined inside the Denning lands.*

“Hey, guys! I can hear the professor coming this way!” a student hissed urgently.

“Be quiet! If he hears you, you’re going to get another beating!”

Cue drumroll and excitement...the newly appointed professor, who’s also a

Royal Knight, is going to show up soon. I actually haven't seen them yet. I'm starting to feel some jitters... The rumor mill says that they strictly prohibit people from chatting in class. In fact, they're apparently so strict that they won't allow people to doze off either!

The girls are exchanging hushed whispers with each other... Hm, oh, I get it. The new professor is likely a handsome Royal Knight hunk just like all his predecessors, huh.

I heard the sound of the door opening with a rattle. "Oh?"

The teacher who had beaten Valjean to a pulp was now making his entrance. The first thing I noticed was a pair of cool, pale-lavender eyes. Next was a mouth pressed tightly into a thin line; the signs of an unyielding spirit. The teacher surveyed the room in a perfect motion which lacked any redundant movement. Then, bowing slightly, they briskly walked up the stairs and advanced forward until they were standing right beside my seat.

"My name is Yugiri Asahi. I have been assigned to be your professor in the place of Loco Moco Highland."

The new professor was actually a woman. Her height was average for a lady, but she seemed taller than she actually was, perhaps because of her firm, long limbs and her petite face. She was a sight to behold; maybe appearance *was* an important part of being a Royal Knight after all.

Meanwhile, I was losing it internally, letting out screeches in my heart. *The male professor I expected is a woman?!*

She continued to talk at me. "Slowe Denning, I hear that Princess Carina was in your care during her stay at this institution. As a Royal Knight, I shall bow my head to you in gratitude for that. Thank you for taking care of Princess Carina back then, as well as during the attack of the black dragon."

"No, I didn't really do any—"

"I see. In that case, I shall now begin the lecture."

This had been my first meeting with Professor Yugiri. She was a beauty with an icy, thorny aura, and her seemingly holier-than-thou attitude made her appear to be a little full of herself.

I hadn't known that there were female Royal Knights, but perhaps only a woman with this much backbone could bear the exhausting missions of the strict and relentless Order of Royal Knights.

"...Because of this, dual-element spells are difficult to manage. However, if you are able to master them, they will provide you with a significant amount of power. You, the one said to be a mage of all elements. Surely you know this very well, do you not?"

I hesitated. "Uhh... Yes, I agree."

"Now then, Slowe Denning, do you know which spells are the most useful on the battlefield?"

"I do not..." I said slowly.

She nodded. "Indeed, I expected as much. Your victory against a dragon was indeed a commendable feat, but you are clearly lacking in actual combat experience. In that case, I shall enlighten you. The most useful spells in the field come from a branch of water magic: healing spells. Do you have any objections to that, Slowe Denning?"

"No, I don't have anything in particular to say against that..."

I really didn't. *But hold up a minute, there is something I want to comment on. Just how many times is this teacher planning on talking to me during class?*

"Due to the difficulty involved in controlling dual-element spells, simple spells are preferred on the battlefield because they allow for more flexibility. The ability to use all elements is a wonderful talent, but in practice, it is limiting during combat. Don't you agree, Slowe Denning?"

"Y-Yes. You are right."

"Indeed, indeed."

Me again? Can't this professor get enough of singling me out? For some reason, Professor Yugiri would sometimes address me during her lecture. She'd check whether I understood the course material, or she'd talk about random trivia that didn't really serve a purpose. *Does she like me or something? Nah, that's impossible. She has this very fierce look in her eyes whenever she looks at*

me.

“...Slowe Denning, did you not hear me?”

“Huh?”

“Were you not listening to me?”

“I-I am so sorry, something was on my mind, and...”

“I see, so that is how it is. It seems that my lecture is terribly dull to our mighty Dragon Slayer.”

“Not really... That isn’t what I feel.”

“Well, it is nothing of concern. Everyone from House Denning is crude. And on top of that, you even happen to be the famous Prodigy of Wind. You probably consider something like my lecture to be beneath your attention.”

House Denning and the Order of Royal Knights were like oil and water. *Is this lady envious because House Denning is leading negotiations with the Dustour Empire at the front lines right now? Is she taking it out on me or something? At the end of the day, the members of the Order don’t often get to do much actual fighting, so some people think that they’re not much to speak of in terms of ability. I guess that would make sense...*

“With that, I shall end today’s lecture. Before we go, does anyone have any questions?”

The new professor was firm and sharp in her mannerisms. I had thought that she’d end class right at the end of the period, but there was quite a lot of time remaining. She didn’t even have a shred of futility while she carried out her duties. It seemed that she was a rather efficient person.

I happened to like that aspect of her. *Sometimes there are teachers who go so far past the end of their assigned class periods that they eat into break time. Yeah, those types. I don’t really like them.*

Seeing that there was no reply, the professor continued, “If there aren’t, then we shall—”

The atmosphere had just begun to loosen up into a nice, relaxed mood when

someone yelled, “Professor Yugiri! Um, I have a question!”

She acknowledged the student. “If it is something within my knowledge, I shall answer.”

The student hesitated for several moments before speaking again. “I heard that the number of Dustour troops stationed at the front lines has been decreasing. Is that true?”

Asking this kind of question to the professor probably crossed several unspoken boundaries at once. Showing how reckless the question had been, a commotion immediately broke out in the classroom. *But they’re all probably wondering about it too.*

Meanwhile, I knew that my classmate was not off the mark. *Rumors stir up people’s curiosity like crazy, don’t they? Be it that rumor or the one about how I would become the Guardian Knight.*

The youth continued. “My older brother is at the front lines! Professor Yugiri, since you’re a Royal Knight, I thought you might know what’s actually happening there so I couldn’t help myself! Please, tell me!”

That makes sense. Of course he’d be especially bothered by it if he has family there. I wanted to announce the truth to everyone, to tell them that the empire had begun to withdraw their troops, just like the rumors said. Not only that, but I had even heard that an envoy from the empire had quietly come here and a peace treaty was in development.

“I believe there is a better person to inquire with as a member of House Denning is among your classmates. Asking him would likely provide you with more accurate information.”

Wait, what did she just say?! She what?! Why did she make a killer pass to me and try to make me responsible?! There’s no way I could talk about that!

“L-Lord Denning...” The boy looked at me with pleading eyes.

Sorry, but no way in hell could I ever answer that! My father and other family members are furiously negotiating peace right now, you know?! Stop looking at me with those eyes! My heart is breaking!

Professor Yugiri chose this moment to start speaking again. “I see. You cannot answer that question either, huh?”

“It’s difficult to say,” I started. “I cannot thoughtlessly spread unconfirmed information, and—”

“From your hesitation, it seems that House Denning has at least partially informed you about the situation.”

All right, it’s clear. This teacher definitely hates me. But she’s a Royal Knight, and considering her station, she probably would keep her silence on the matter.

“In that case, allow me to assuage your fears. The Dustour Empire is steadily pulling back its army. There have not been any skirmishes, and there have been no reports of any wounded soldiers either. If things continue to proceed like this, there is a high possibility that the war might not occur, or at least that is House Denning’s conclusion. Isn’t that correct, Slowe Denning?”

“Hey, did you hear that?!”

“Yeah!”

“But is there any truth to it?”

“That professor is a Royal Knight! There’s no way she would lie!”

“I’m really surprised she told us though!”

The air had been hanging still in the room from Professor Yugiri’s words, but after she had left the classroom, cheers began to resound from every corner. The excitement was well warranted: a Royal Knight from the upper echelon of Daryth had confirmed the rumors, despite the lack of public announcements.

After Professor Yugiri left the room, I frantically gave chase and caught up to her.

“Professor Yugiri! Wh-What in the world were you thinking? It’s still a confidential matter, and—”

“It will be made public before long. It’s also worthwhile to share this information with students in this school since most of them are nobles.”

“But—”

The professor stopped in her tracks and almost spat out her next words at me, irritation clear in her tone. “Slowe Denning. A mage with your talent and power might not understand this, but right now, this school is being forced to do a precarious balancing act to allow for its continued existence. I believe that releasing some pressure like this is important.”

That evening, I had a hard time falling asleep. It was the first night that I had stayed up late after returning to Kirsch.

“That Royal Knight...” I grumbled. “Who gave her the authority to tell everyone about what’s going on at the front lines, huh?”

Even if the Royal Knights were on bad terms with House Denning, there were some things that must never be disclosed.

I fell silent, deep in thought. Considering how she had thoroughly trounced Valjean in a spell duel and putting that together with her manner in class, she was quite the headstrong type.

Interested in how everyone felt about this professor, I decided to take action the next day. I went to find Tina right away. She was in the middle of spell practice, and I asked her about it.

“Hey, Tina... What are your thoughts on Professor Yugiri?”

“Are you talking about the new professor? The Royal Knight?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

There were a bunch of things that had surprised me after I came back to school, and Tina had been one of them. She was a friend of mine and a commoner girl with a mysterious charm who could make anyone smile.

“Hmm, well...” She trailed off in contemplation.

Right now, she was taking great pains to float an orb of water in the air. *Hm?* “Wait, wasn’t Miss Tina an earth mage,” you ask? No, I’m afraid you’re wrong now. *Breaking news! Miss Tina’s abilities in water magic have awakened!*



“How do I put this...” Tina started off. “Professor Yugiri is a kind of person unlike any other at Kirsch. You could say that she’s pretty strict with students. On top of that, she’s from the comital house Asahi, who are famous for being rich. I also didn’t even know that there was a woman among the great Royal Knights.”

It was rather pathetic of me to admit this, but I had been in the same boat. I had been *completely* in the dark about the possibility of a female Royal Knight.

Tina’s tone turned, and she seemed a little puzzled. “But... I do wonder why Professor Yugiri ended up in that spot. Oh, don’t tell anyone else, but from watching her in class, teaching other people doesn’t really seem to be her cup of tea, don’t you think? I just feel like there must have been someone more suitable for the position. Everyone says that the professor’s lectures are difficult to understand too.”

“Oh, you’re right...”

“She’s all about water spells and nothing else. Though I *did* go up to her once to ask her about water magic, and she answered me earnestly back then. Professor Yugiri is just about the only person willing to give such attentive advice to a commoner like me.”

Well, she was also the person who beat Valjean up because he had said that he wanted to know what a Royal Knight was like at their full strength. When it comes to students, she probably takes them all seriously, no matter what their status may be.

“I thought that she talked pretty excessively about water magic during my class, but huh, she’s like that in other classes too... Oh, and uh, sorry about disturbing you in the middle of your practice session, but could I ask you one more thing?”

“Please ask away. This is the only area where I’m useful to you, Lord Denning!”

“Welllll... Has there been anything...*weird* going on at school?”

Tina paused. “When you’re the one saying it, it somehow sounds as if danger is right around the corner.”

How rude! I'm not the type of person who goes around with trouble following my every step, you know? That's the role of anime protagonists! In fact, I usually even take on the part of solving their problems behind the scenes.

"But, well, let's see... Something unusual... I can't think of anything in particular."

"I see. That's for the best, after all. Oh, look, Tina, your water orb is shrinking very quickly. You should concentrate."

Tina gasped. "Oh, whoa...! Ah! There *is* one thing, actually. I shouldn't talk about it loudly in public, but one small monster snuck onto campus recently. I heard that there were a few students feeling ill because it gave them flashbacks to *that* night."

I hesitated. "That night, huh..."

It was only natural that they had panicked. That monster incident had been so close to a total disaster. If a single mistake had been made, or rather, if I hadn't made it back here in time, rebuilding the campus might have been the least of our worries. I wouldn't be surprised if students were traumatized by the event.

Kirsch Mage Institute had been brilliantly reconstructed to try to erase the scars left by the attack. The addition of the new clock tower and flower beds were probably an attempt to paint over everyone's gloomy thoughts about the campus. Something new and beautiful would likely help for students' spirits.

"What about you, Tina?" I hesitated. "Did that incident traumatize you as well?"

"I've had many nightmares about back then too, but I know magic and have a way of defending myself, so it isn't that bad. But my roommate has been troubled by the incident for a long time now, and I had the feeling that...no matter how prettily they dress up the school, our memories will never fade."

"I see..."

"Everyone worked really hard to get into this school, so from the bottom of their hearts, they don't want to give up. I mean, there was even a girl who tried to get her hands on illegal potions to protect her own mental state..."

“Illegal? Wait, don’t tell me, they tried to buy from a potion dealer?”

“Yes...” Tina muttered at length. “Recently, a suspicious shadowy figure has started prowling around in the woods, and apparently Professor Yugiri is dealing with them.”

Elixirs infused with healing and soothing magic would burn a hole in one’s wallet. However, the world was never short of people who sought them out. Potion dealers were typically water mages who provided such potions to these deep-pocketed buyers.

“Tina, you should tell your friend to stop, at all costs. Black market potions have no guarantees, and there’s even the risk of being used as a human test subject for magic experiments. But, well, considering how serious she is, Professor Yugiri will surely deal with the potion dealer appropriately. That aside, Tina, is the spell you’re practicing right now what I think it is?”

“Lord Denning, I’ve also been thinking about a lot of things, and one of my new goals is to master this spell. *Heal!*” When nothing happened, Tina paused in confusion. “Huh? *Heal!* Aha ha, it’s no good. It isn’t activating at all.”

“*Heal* is a difficult one. It’s too early for you to be trying it out... You’ve only just awoken water magic, haven’t you?”

Tina was vexed about it, but in my opinion, her growth was shockingly fast. She was like a sponge, greedy about obtaining new knowledge, and she wasn’t shy about putting in the hard work either. Just like she had said herself, she had a clear goal, and that was why she was making such rapid progress.

“I thought that if I knew water-based healing spells, I could rescue the wounded in case I was ever dragged into a fight. While school was closed, I went through extensive training to try and master *Heal*, and yet...” Tina drooped her shoulders. “I’m nowhere near finished! I can still put in much more effort! And Lord Denning is back now too!”

Seeing Tina in high spirits like that really made me realize how time had flown by. After all, up until a little while ago—or rather, back in the anime—Tina hadn’t even been able to use magic at all!

With classes filling my schedule, a day could pass by in an instant. It was a world of difference compared to my time in the Denning lands, where I had spent all my time sleeping because I didn't have anything better to do. And of course, the class that left the biggest impression on me was Practical Magic, since that's where I could use my abilities to my heart's content.

My eyes widened. "Wait, Professor Yugiri favors *Shuya*?"

The young blond man nodded. "Yes, you heard right, Lord Slowe. *That* Shuya. I mean, true, at times it seems like he has gotten a little more mature during the long holiday, but this is Shuya we are talking about! Shuya! And she approves of *him*."

"You..." I was a little aghast. "You've been watching him very closely, I see..."

During Practical Magic, I had been off to one corner of the training field with Valjean, listening to him talk while he charged his sword with a spell. Thanks to him, I was able to get the basic gist of what had gone on at school after it reopened.

Right now, I needed to focus on the changes to figure out what exactly Rooney had been talking about. However, there was something else that was taking up the same amount of my interest as investigating odd events at school: Shuya.

"Professor Yugiri doesn't know how eccentric that guy is. Ah, that reminds me. Shuya has stopped carrying that crystal ball around. Maybe it means that even he has grown up a little? But still, this *is* Shuya we are talking about."

"I think you've also improved plenty, Valjean."

"I am very glad to hear that from you, but... That damned Shuya." Valjean gritted his teeth. "I do not know what he's been up to in these past two months, but he's almost like a whole new person when it comes to magic. Even when I asked him about what kind of secret training he had done, he wouldn't answer me."

"Well, yeah..." I muttered.

Huzak, then Zenelaus... That guy has experienced a lot. Sounds a bit rich coming from me, but it's pretty amazing that someone of Shuya's level was able

to travel through Huzak on foot and survive the battle in Zenelaus. It's an absolute miracle, you know? I had a front-row seat to watch his adventures this time, and I've learned firsthand just how absurd his luck is...

"Lord Slowe, you've quieted down all of a sudden. Wait, do you perhaps know something about Shuya's training?"

"Ah, ignore me, it's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"I am curious, but I suppose I shall put it aside for now. What I said just now isn't all though. There's even a rumor going around that Professor Yugiri is inviting Shuya to her club."

"Club? Oh, those special teaching sessions teachers have with their favorite students? Are you interested too, Valjean? To put it bluntly, you'd only end up doing chores in the teachers' stead in those, you know?"

"I really wouldn't mind being an errand boy or honestly anything, really! Think about it, a private session held by a Royal Knight on active duty!!! She might even be divulging how someone could become a Royal Knight, or something like that!"

The requirements for joining Professor Yugiri's club were that one had to be a water mage and that they had to have her special approval. Valjean could never join since he had no talent for water magic, but he was apparently still trying to worm his way onto the list of the professor's favorites by challenging her to duel after duel.

"It's about time you give up, don't you think? Only water mages can join the professor's sessions, right?"

"No way! Shuya has her approval, and I cannot stand the thought of being rejected when he's in there!"

"Okay, let's put Shuya aside for now..."

Especially after he had gone through the battle of Zenelaus, Shuya had shown tremendous growth. In some ways, magical strength was directly linked to one's mental state, and that guy's mental fortitude probably had hardened in leaps and bounds due to that conflict. After all, it wouldn't be an understatement to describe a battle of that scale as a war.

Even in the show, Shuya was a guy with ridiculous room for growth, and he became stronger with every fight, so... If someone wants to win against Shuya right now, I'll be honest, they're going to have a hard time. At any rate, I've got to admit that Professor Yugiri has a good eye for talent for her to give recognition to him.

Now then, as for what the grand anime protagonist is doing right now... I looked around. There he is. He's sitting cross-legged and alone at another corner of the training field. Is he meditating? What the heck is that guy doing?

"I wonder what happened to that guy," Valjean commented. "Sometimes, he has this cold look in his eyes, like he's looking at something far in the distance."

"Who knows? If you're that curious, you might as well go ask him yourself."

"Um, no, I would rather not..."

A nearby voice was loud enough to interrupt our conversation. "You may be a commoner, but you have promise. If you are that eager to master dual-element spells, then manifest one right now! Try harder! Do not let the spell take over! Fight it to the end!"

There was a ruckus breaking out. I wondered what was going on and took a look around. There was a crowd gathered around something. I could hear Professor Yugiri's voice from inside the encirclement.

"It seems that Professor Yugiri is up to something again," Valjean said.

"Valjean, what is *that*?"

"Professor Yugiri is relentless, you see. She's the complete opposite of Professor Loco Moco, and she teaches by hammering a skill into someone with brute force. But she might be more rigorous than usual today. Who in the world is she teaching, I wonder— Lord Slowe? Is something wrong?"

"...I have a bad feeling about this. I'm heading over to take a look."

Magic was indeed an unreasonable thing. Nobody knew what kind of catalyst might improve their abilities or awaken a new branch of magic within them. Magic was linked to the spirits, and mages who couldn't see spirits would

sometimes put themselves through harsh trials as they sought ways to become stronger. Spirits were cruel creatures that, from time to time, would lend great power to others who had imposed arduous training on themselves. They were way too fickle.

“Open your eyes, commoner! You want to master a dual-element spell, do you not?! If so, you must be able to overcome an ordeal as mundane as this!”

“Hey, let me through!” I barked.

Weaving my way through the crowd of gathered students, I rushed over to the source of the commotion. Everyone was watching something, cringing hard at the sight. I followed their gazes and then I spotted Tina, who was completely out of it.

I bit down on my lip, hard.

A spell was going on a rampage, and Professor Yugiri stood next to the source, watching over the whole process. Tina had nearly blacked out, but her spell still wouldn't cease. The spirits were going berserk! This was identical to that time when I first suppressed Valjean Greatlorde's spell. However, despite being someone who was supposed to protect Tina, Professor Yugiri didn't do anything. She wasn't even making a single move to evacuate the students around them.

That was why I didn't hesitate to take action. I used magic to force Tina to lose consciousness and dispel her spell. I caught her in my arms before she could collapse onto the ground.

“Slowe Denning,” the professor hissed. “Are you trying to disrupt this lesson?!”

“Lesson?” My tone was incredulous. “I only stopped her spell. More importantly, may I ask what that was all about?”

The professor seemed to take a moment to compose herself. “One of you, bring this student to the infirmary.”

“Y-Yes, ma'am!” a commoner girl hastily replied. “Hey, guys, don't just stand there! Move it!”

A few commoner girls teamed up and carried Tina away, proceeding to leave the training field. All the while, they bobbed their heads gratefully in my direction, and I felt my anger starting to simmer.

“Class is not over yet. All of you, continue your practice. Now then, is there anyone else who would like to seek out my guidance, just like the student from earlier?”

I was speechless.

Whispers could be heard from every direction.

“Hey... You should go.”

“But you saw what just happened!”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to be a Royal Knight?”

“You moron! Did you forget how many times she sent Greatlorde to the infirmary?!”

“Asking Professor Yugiri for advice is equal to asking to be tossed around mercilessly like a rag doll!”

“Count me out!”

“Is nobody willing to put themselves forward?!” Professor Yugiri barked at the crowd. “How could any of you pass up an opportunity to receive direct instruction from a Royal Knight?!”

Hey. Hey. Professor Yugiri, how could you try to start the lesson again as if nothing happened? Your pupil, Tina, nearly sustained some grave injuries!

I couldn’t keep my anger down any further. “Professor, I am afraid that you still have not answered my question. I asked you what in the world that display was,” I said slowly.

She narrowed her eyes. “What are you on about, Slowe Denning?”

“Tina has only recently awoken her abilities in water magic. Despite that, you made her attempt a dual-element spell...” I clenched my teeth. “I am asking what was going on in your mind to do something so absurd!”

It was still way too early for Tina to try combining two separate elements. I

wasn't questioning the professor's method of teaching, but whether she was even qualified to be a teacher in charge of educating students.

Being a noble, Valjean had a lot of experience with magic training starting from long before he entered this school, but even he was very cautious whenever he attempted a dual-element spell. Tina had only just learned that she had an aptitude for water magic at all.

The professor's tone was clipped. "She mentioned that she needed the means to defend herself in an emergency, so I provided her with an opportunity to learn that. That child fully comprehends the fact that the weak would always face injustice in this world. She may be a commoner, but she has promise. Therefore, I was teaching that feeble one the means to fight."

"Nevertheless, do you not think that it is too soon for Tina to try dual-element spells?"

"She asked for help, and I gave it. It's also better to taste hardship early on rather than to delay it. That is my policy as a teacher. If you have any complaints, voice them."

"I've also heard that you gave Valjean a vicious beating and that you banned him from using water elixirs to aid his recovery," I said at length. "Professor Yugiri, I cannot help but wonder whether you truly came to this school as a teacher."

"Valjean Greatlorde's ambition is to become a Royal Knight. If that is the case, he should wholeheartedly understand how strong a Royal Knight needs to be. Furthermore, avoiding pain would impede progress. It is likely impossible for a knave like Loco Moco Highland to replicate my ways of instruction. He did run away from the Order, after all."

Even against Valjean, she had gone too far. If what I heard from him was true, his training hospitalized him for nearly a week. I couldn't help but feel that this was *wrong*. Valjean's current abilities were just a tad above an average student's, and there was an impossibly high wall separating him and a Royal Knight.

Plus, if it had been Professor Loco Moco in her place, there was no way in a thousand years that he would do something that practically sentenced Tina to

public humiliation!

“That look in your eyes...” Her brows furrowed. “Slowe Denning, do not forget that I am your professor. If you have an opinion, you had better voice it loud and clear.”

However, my anger wasn't caused by the professor's policies as a teacher. Professor Yugiri was supposed to be a talented water mage, but she hadn't done anything to ensure Tina's safety earlier. She hadn't even told the other students to back away before the spell went berserk. She had just stood there and watched.

Many nobles of high rank dismissed the existence of commoners, and I sensed an inkling of that haughtiness in this professor.

I took a moment to formulate my next words. “By any chance, did you do this out of spite against me?”

“Out of spite? What a curious way of putting it. But I suppose this is a good opportunity... As of this moment, a slightly bothersome tale is permeating this institution. There is something I'd like to say to you, Slowe Denning.”

“What would that be?”

“Do you understand how significant it is for Her Majesty to endorse a *student* for the position of the Guardian Knight? I believe that you have not been treating Her Majesty's words with the sincerity they well deserve.”

With an invisible shudder, all movement seemed to halt inside the training field. Everyone paused what they were doing and hung onto every single word coming out of the professor's mouth.

“Professor Yugiri, that...” I fumbled with my words. “That has nothing to do with the current situation.”

“Slowe Denning, Her Majesty directly asked for *you*. Shouldn't you revel in the glory and take pride in that fact?”

My fellow students had thought that the rumors featuring me, the Guardian Knight, and the queen were just tall tales. However, the professor was a Royal Knight and she had been there as a witness. She knew it was a fact.

“Hey... Did you hear that?”

“No way. It was real?”

“I thought him becoming the Guardian Knight was just a fib.”

“Same here.”

“But the professor said...”

“Professor Yugiri acknowledged it, which means...”

A current Royal Knight had given authenticity to the rumor, and it was immediately elevated into a fact from fiction.

“Do you not think that you are being a little conceited?”

My tone was flat. “What are you trying to say, Professor Yugiri?”

“The slaying of a dragon is a rather...*splendid* feat. However, I imagine that it would be better for me to teach you a lesson about what it truly means to become the Guardian Knight.”

After pausing for a time, I finally managed to squeeze words past my clenched teeth. I struggled to keep my tone polite. “Better for you to teach me a lesson, you say? Oh really, now.”

And just like that, the professor had readily tossed my secret out in the open. She didn’t even spare a crumble of consideration in my direction, full of arrogance due to her status as she made those weaker than her into objects of public ridicule.

I had almost forgotten that I absolutely despised nobles like her who couldn’t be fussed to be thoughtful for once in their lives. *Does that mean that her constant snipes in my direction in class were maybe done out of petty spite because I was given the offer to become the Guardian Knight?*

“You are a special case even though you’re a student, are you not? You may have the favor of Her Majesty, or something of that sort, but...I shall teach you what a real knight loyal to their country looks like.”

“Professor Yugiri. This, and your attitude towards that student just now... I do not think I could ever tolerate all this. You’re a failure as a teacher,” I hissed.

“Then I shall also be truthful about my own thoughts. Slowe Denning, I detest you. In my eyes, you are impossibly far from qualified to be the Guardian Knight. But I must admit, you’ve surprised me. To think that you were able to dodge my spell just now despite seeing it for the first time... Indeed, in terms of ability, you are rather outstanding.”

A bystander would have only noticed that Professor Yugiri had touched the grip of her sword. She hadn’t even begun to chant any incantation or do anything that would tip me off. However, my intuition had told me to run away from where I had been standing, so I had moved out of the way. The ground where I once stood was now stained black. I felt goosebumps rise on my skin. *Poison*. Those of House Asahi were gifted in water magic and they could conjure up poison in an instant.

I paused in disbelief. “Professor, may I remind you that I am just a student? Should I interpret that as a declaration of war?”



“Giving you the same treatment as an average student is absurd. After all, you have already traded blows with a man who was once my colleague.”

“Bringing that up when we have an audience... Don’t you think you’re a bit too talkative right now?”

“I’m aware and cannot argue that. That was probably why I was deemed unfit as a Royal Knight and sent to a school like this. But that doesn’t matter right now. Show me the power that made Her Majesty consider you worthy of the title of Guardian Knight. Don’t play around and craft ridiculous magic circles in the air. Show me your true abilities.”

Everyone craned their necks to the sky as a light drizzle of rain pattered against the ground despite there not being a single cloud in sight. The sky was a spotless azure blue, so why was there rain?

I quickly realized that this water was artificial and was the result of the professor’s spell clashing with mine. Other than us two, nobody was able to keep up with the speed of our battle.

“Professor Yugiri... It is rather impressive that you were able to negate my spell without unsheathing your sword, but this fight is already over.”

“Oh? I am afraid you’ll have to be clearer.”

“With this, I am sure that you will see how much of a threat dual-element spells can be, and that it is still too early for Tina to attempt it this early into her awakening of water magic.”

Wind hadn’t been the only element that I had been using, however. I had actually cast a two-pronged attack from the sky and the earth. At the same time as I cast a wind spell, I manifested an earth spell and a hand made from earth seized the professor’s foot in a firm grip. The professor had only seemed to pay attention to the sky, but the wind had only been a decoy. I had placed all my bets on the earth spell. This was a dual-element spell of wind and earth, magic many levels beyond the spell Tina had been trying to manifest earlier.

It was indeed handy, but manipulating two different magics at once was truly difficult to pull off and extremely effective. It was obviously my win.

“A dual-element spell, huh...? We are far from finished though, Slowe Denning.”

“I believe not, Professor Yugiri. It seems that our conflict ends here. After all, even someone of your station probably cannot talk yourself out of this one from the looks of things...”

An authoritative voice cut our conversation short. “Yugiri, you have gone too far this time. Even I couldn’t fully cover for you at this point.”

Looks like someone called for him after seeing our clash. What a swift move. Good job!

“Headmaster, I—”

“This has gone far beyond the realm of education. I hear that you have revealed more than is necessary once again, Yugiri, and you’ve further complicated matters with your actions. You came to this school as a *teacher*, not a Royal Knight. Your conduct is unbecoming of an educator.”

“I...”

“I have nothing further to say on this matter. It seems that it is necessary for you to take some time to reflect on yourself.”

The headmaster of the school made a point to consider the students’ needs over anything else. His word was final, and there was no room for me to add anything at all.

Professor Yugiri’s penalty from the headmaster was one week of probation. During that period, she was allowed to invest some effort into mental training, or she could observe how other professors went about their classes and reconsider her duties as a teacher. *Probation, huh? That’s probably a pretty big blow to that professor considering how prideful she is.*

However, ever since the conflict between Professor Yugiri and me, my peaceful life at Kirsch Mage Institute was in disarray. To me, the root of all evil was Professor Yugiri because...

“Lord Denning! So the rumor about the queen *was* true!” Tina exclaimed.

...she had gone ahead and actually revealed that the rumor about the queen's offer was unquestionably a fact grounded in reality!



"I cannot accept this. I will *never* approve of that whelp becoming the next Guardian Knight! Is it his power? Is might the only thing that matters? Could someone become the Guardian Knight as long as they are strong enough? Does this mean that Her Majesty does not care about dignity or upbringing?! How could such a whelp ever become the successor to Sir Delfrey?!"

When Sepith Pendragon, the man hailed in sublime regard in the Country of Knights, had disappeared from the competition, I thought that my chance had finally come. I would make full use of this opportunity and sprint down the path to becoming the next Guardian Knight.

I had dedicated my very soul to my duty, but what had waited for me was a cold reality: being sent off to Kirsch Mage Institute.

Yugiri was currently in the forest outside Kirsch Mage Institute in search of monsters. Slaughtering them was nothing more than an outlet for her frustrations towards the mission bestowed upon her.

"What did I ever do to deserve this?! Listen up, you lowly monsters taking refuge here! Don't you even dare have the delusion that you could take my life! And I have to question Her Majesty too! Why did she give such a task to me?! At this point, what is there left to test about that whelp?!"

Yugiri had been ordered to become a teacher in order to determine whether or not Slowe Denning was fit to become the Guardian Knight. She had been selected in Loco Moco Highland's place since he could not be impartial in his judgment.

Yugiri didn't think that she had the refinement necessary to become a teacher. She was a soldier, not an instructor.

"He's enough. That whelp slew a dragon, and his power is already fit to become the Guardian Knight. I was spared due to mercy from a *student*..."

Several days prior, she had been underhanded and exploited Slowe Denning's friendship with the commoner girl to create a situation that would incite his

anger. However, the results had left her feeling sorry for herself. He had gone easy on her, and she even felt as if he had been mocking her shallow emotions.

Yugiri had been self-aware enough to realize that there was a clear difference in ability between herself and Slowe Denning.

Sensing the silence, Yugiri slowly came to herself. She had focused all her concentration on eliminating monsters, and before she knew it, there was not a single sign of life left around her.

Yugiri furrowed her eyebrows. The atmosphere sent a shudder down her spine. *I have ended up in a deplorable place*, Yugiri thought. She was in an anomalous area, deep in the forest. The rotting ruins of several buildings were lined up in a row in the silent wilderness.

This was an abandoned facility inside the forest, a place well-known to insiders. It was a relic of the darker history of Kirsch Mage Institute which only very few people were privy to, even inside the school itself.

Suddenly, a single person slinked out of a slanting building. She didn't have much of a presence; she was a woman who blended into the background, leaving no impression in her wake.

She was the one who broke the silence. "Oh my, young miss. We meet again."

Yugiri pointed her sword at the woman, threat clear in her stance. "You're still in this place? I distinctly remember warning you that you must not linger in this area any longer than you already have, potion dealer of the north."

Yugiri's first encounter with this woman had been not too long ago. One day, Yugiri had put her name forward to the headmaster to take on the task of exterminating the forest monsters. After the now-teacher had sustained minor injuries from her battles, this woman had suddenly appeared and presented a soothing elixir to Yugiri. This potion dealer had introduced herself as Fran.

Though Yugiri was a talented water mage in her own right, that had been the first time she'd actually met one of these potion dealers in person. She could have chosen to heal herself with her own magic, but her curiosity had gotten the better of her.

"Potion dealer," Yugiri said slowly. "You are in Daryth's territory. People of

your sort are not welcome here. I am sure that I have previously told you to return to the north, and that I was duty bound to cut you down if I saw you again.”

Yugiri had her sword unsheathed, but the woman remained as calm as still water.

“Your actions do not match up with your heart at all. I do not sense any wish to murder me from you. Shall I give you my guess on why that is so?”

Yugiri hesitated. “If you truly can deduce it, then speak.”

“It all stems from the fact that you are an outstanding water mage. Last time, I offered you an elixir, and I assume that I piqued your interest with it. Am I correct?”

In Daryth, it was illegal for mages to make potions without official qualifications from the country. However, when Yugiri tested the potion infused with this dealer’s magic, she had been utterly fascinated by the incredible workmanship. Being a member of House Asahi, a family gifted in water magic and the household that devised a way to create poison from healing magic, it had left her with an itch to learn more.



I cannot do anything right now due to my probation, so in that case, I might as well speak with this potion dealer. Perhaps it will provide me some relief.

“Indeed, the potion you brewed was praiseworthy. Where did you learn such remarkable ways of manipulating magic?”

Chapter 3: The Solitude of the Guardian Knight

“Master Slowe! It is way past the time we agreed on!”

Mallow had given me several conditions in exchange for allowing me to return home to Kirsch, and one of them was to seriously consider my answer to the queen. *Oh, wait, “returning home” might be a bit off. Technically, my real homeland is the Denning lands...*

“Didn’t you promise that you’d try to lose weight?! You were only allowed to come to Kirsch because of that promise, and yet...you’re doing nothing but slacking off like a sloth! Master Slowe, I cannot believe what I have been seeing!”

I let out a snort of protest.

And well, on most days at Kirsch, my mornings start with Charlotte’s fit of anger, something far from kind to my poor ears.

“Master Slowe, you *must* work harder to lose weight again! But look at you, you’re sleeping while snorting like an actual pig! Enough! I’m confiscating your pillow!”

“Oiiink. It’s hard to sleep without it, Charlotte. Give my pillow baaack...”

“Master Slowe...I don’t have all the time in the world, you know?! Please don’t assume that I can constantly stick to your side and help you with your weight loss! I have my own affairs to take care of! I also need to earn money to buy a wand, and in the long term, money is—”

There are a few other reasons why I chose to persuade Mallow and came back to Kirsch. One of them is Rooney’s warning.

“Come on! Master Slowe! Wake! Up! Don’t go back to sleep!”

Speaking of that guy... Seriously, what in the world is he up to? Going into hostile territory and stirring up a mess... If it had been a direct descendant of House Denning who found him instead of a maid, things might have escalated

to a proper battle. It would have been a disaster, you know? Well, that guy's smart, so he probably aimed for the perfect time while everyone was out there at the front lines, but still.

"If only I had my weight-loss potion this time..."

"Oink?! Charlotte, what are you saying?!"

"Master Slowe, I'm sure you remember the effects of the weight-loss potion too! I've been trying to replicate it myself, but I can't produce the same color and odor!"

"Uh... Uhhh..."

Are you serious, Charlotte? You're doing such dangerous experiments again?

I still haven't forgotten those dark, anguishing days when I had to struggle against the earthworm... I'll be honest, I never, ever want to drink that kind of thing again!

"I see, Lord Slowe. So that's why you've been rubbing your eyes so sleepily this morning..."

"Yeah, it's a tough life out there, Valjean. Imagine what it feels like to have your morning start before the sun even rises! Why do I alone have to get up at such an ungodly hour? I mean, I get why Charlotte's doing this and all, but you know... Having someone repeatedly chant 'lose weight' into my ears the moment I'm awake does terrible things to my motivation."

I couldn't even overstate how important it was to wake up pleasantly in the morning and start one's day in a comfortable state. However, I had been blasted out of dreamland by Charlotte, and my head was still cloudy as I brought a spoonful of breakfast to my mouth.

"I am afraid I cannot agree with your last statement, Lord Slowe. From where I'm sitting, I could swear that it sounds as if you are bragging about how a cute girl woke you up first thing this morning."

"...Oink. Heh."

"Ah, you laughed. You definitely laughed. Maybe that means that you are

enjoying the current situation? Perhaps you even refuse to get up by yourself because you *want* Miss Charlotte to wake you up? I believe I am not too far off the mark, Lord Slowe.”

I cackled with a grin.

Valjean stared at me. “Lord Slowe... Do you realize that the way you laughed just now sounded like something from your dark times?”

Oh, oops, can't let that happen. I really don't have any plans of becoming the blackhearted Piggy Duke again.

“Ah, well...” I cleared my throat. “Listen up, Valjean. You see, Charlotte would receive a large sum of money if she succeeds at making me thin down again, and she’s planning on spending all that on a wand. That’s why she’s even serious about a small thing like waking me up early. I have to admit, there is nothing more tiresome than her antics right now... I don’t plan on slimming down, so I never even thought about doing something like jogging.”

“I can understand why Miss Charlotte is so insistent though.”

“You can? What does that mean?”

Valjean lowered his voice. “Please listen carefully. She is your retainer, and relationships between master and retainer in House Denning are more intimate than in the average household. You were offered the position of Guardian Knight by Her Majesty, and Miss Charlotte was surely very proud of you. But now, you are living the life of a sloth, conduct completely improper for a knight which even sullies your own dignity.”

I hesitated. “I mean, I repeat, it’s not like I’m a knight right now or anything.”

“The *queen* addressed you directly. Rejecting her is out of the question. And thus, it’s no surprise that Miss Charlotte is so angry. You are no longer a mere student now, Lord Slowe.”

So this guy is also part of the faction that wants to force me onto the pedestal of Guardian Knight, huh? Look at him! He's just saying whatever he wants!

I clicked my tongue in annoyance. “So you’re one of them too? Ugh, that’s enough talking about me. Which reminds me... What happened to your job

helping out in the dining hall? You were like a waiter or something before, right?”

“Recently, I’ve taken up teaching commoners magic. I can also learn from these sessions, so it was the better choice.”

Valjean had become a magic tutor. According to him, he was earning a respectable bit of money off that. *Well, some of the commoners here are from rich merchant families, and they’re swimming in much more wealth than the poorer nobles. Commoners who are able to squeeze their names onto Kirsch’s roster are elites in their own right.*

“Oh. Hey, you over there, could I have seconds?”

“Lord Slowe, are you sure? If Miss Charlotte discovers that you tried to have more...”

“I’m sure. It’s not much anyway.”

A voice of protest interrupted our conversation. “You! Are! Not! Allowed! There is no way that could be okay! You are on a diet, Master Slowe!”

Ah... I whimpered in my heart. The plate was nimbly seized by a hand and was slowly disappearing from my sight.

“Come on, Master Slowe! The dining hall is quite full now, so if you’re finished with your food, please leave!”

“Yes, oink...” I muttered dejectedly.

Charlotte wanted me to lose weight, but I wasn’t motivated at all.

In fact, I might even be less enthusiastic now than when I was the blackhearted Piggy Duke. After all, I had a dream to work towards back then. I had wanted to slim down and become a man worthy of Charlotte. But now, losing weight would be a one-way ticket straight to becoming the Guardian Knight.

My lament weighed heavily in my heart. *All I ever wanted was to live every day in happiness...*

“This is so frustrating...” Both Valjean and Charlotte blindly believed that I was going to take up the queen’s offer. *I mean, I can’t blame them.*

I especially don't blame Valjean, since he wants to become a Royal Knight himself. That's the reason he constantly picks himself back up to face Professor Yugiri again and again, no matter how many times she beats him to the ground. He'd actively embrace agony if that's what it took to achieve his dream. To him, declining the offer of Guardian Knight isn't even an option.

"Lord Denning, is there something on your mind?"

"Ah, sorry, I promised to help you with your magic, but I lost focus... More importantly, Tina, are you feeling better now?"

"I've made a full recovery! I owe it all to your *Heal* spell, Lord Denning."

Up until now, Professor Yugiri had sent countless students to the infirmary during Practical Magic classes. She'd also prohibited students injured under her instruction from using water elixirs or healing spells. Apparently, the professor believed that suffering brought forth improvement. *Jeez, she's pretty extreme even among the most hot-blooded teachers. Tina was right; we've never had a teacher like her at Kirsch up until now.*

"Using two different elements at the same time is really difficult though, I must say," Tina noted before letting out a sheepish laugh. "I don't see myself mastering that anytime in the near future."

"I think it's better for you to focus just on earth magic for now."

Tina hesitated. "I will... I've never been a person who could juggle multiple things at once very well. That reminds me, Lord Denning... You've been spending all your time on me lately. Are you sure you don't have to help Miss Charlotte with her spells too?"

"Charlotte is currently taking a break from magic."

"Oh, really? Speaking of your retainer, I have been seeing her all over the place these past few days! I was a little impressed with how much work she has been taking on."

"You see, Charlotte broke her wand... Tina, you know what House Denning is like, right? During our stay there, she ended up putting a lot of strain on her wand, and you can guess what happened after that..."

“I’ve heard that parents can stop the naughtiest of children from crying by threatening to let House Denning adopt them. Your family is probably much stricter than Professor Yugiri is... But wait, the members of House Denning are out on the front lines right now, right? Was it really all right for you to come here instead?”

Ack. That statement was a direct hit on a sore spot...

“You have to remember that I’m a good-for-nothing among them.” I shrugged. “Let’s just say I have no place in my family.”

“Even though you’re the Dragon Slayer who saved the school?”

“All the more because of that. Leading other people like my family is ‘supposed’ to do just isn’t my thing. I much prefer to be on my own.”

Still, what an interesting turn of events. In the anime, I had continuously diminished my value by acting the part of the blackhearted Piggy Duke, and my family had thrown me away in the end. In this world, however, I am the earnest Piggy Duke. Even though it sounds a bit rich coming from me, I’ve persevered and even became someone glorious enough to be hailed as a hero! But after all that, what’s awaiting me is being sent off to the royal court as the next Guardian Knight.

Honestly, both scenarios are pretty much the same thing to me. Well, if I said that out loud, Valjean would probably give me an earful. He’d say something like, “You could become Princess Carina’s Guardian Knight! How could you say that? Have you gone mad?!”

I found myself mumbling and snorting under my breath. Rooney had gone out of his way to come and give me a warning, so I had taken it seriously. Even during classes, I had always made a point to be on full alert.

There was the possibility that someone had infiltrated the school in disguise, like how Professor Arle had. Or maybe someone already here was hiding malicious intentions, like Sepith. I also couldn’t rule out the idea that someone could have added something nasty to my breakfast this morning either.

But no matter how I had looked at it, there was only peace to be found at

Kirsch. Today's breakfast, too, had been the embodiment of perfection like always.

A student shouted, "Hey! Sounds like Professor Yugiri is off probation! I heard she's at the training field, taking out her anger on students! Oops, no, she's 'coaching Royal Knight hopefuls'!"

I couldn't help but oink as I blinked in a stupor.

My guts told me that a storm was brewing once again.

"During my probation, I was blessed with the opportunity to observe other professors' lectures on an assortment of different subjects, and I reflected on many things. However, my stance has not changed."

After a few weeks of being removed from her classes, our dear Professor Yugiri—Royal Knight and advocate of "hard work trumps all" to an extent that she was willing to give students a good beating—had made her return.

"The majority of you are nobles, and among you, there are even some hailing from major families that have influence in the royal palace. Due to your status, there are very few, or perhaps even *no* professors who would dare discipline you. Indeed, I might be an anomaly compared to all of your instructors up until now, but I have arrived at the conclusion that I will not abandon my personal policies."

Wow, the first thing she begins with is a declaration that she has no remorse. Make no mistake, she's definitely a hotshot!

And to my absolute dismay, I'm afraid to announce that even after that fight, this professor hasn't changed her tune at all. She's not even trying to hide her piercing gaze towards me.

Professor Yugiri carried on with her speech. "In addition, several spirited students have directly come up to me and asked what they should do if they wish to become a Royal Knight. Regrettably, their abilities were all severely below the criteria needed to make it past even the initial selection process. You lot are desperately lacking in training, even compared to when I was a student. There are only a handful of students with good prospects in the whole lot of

you.”

“P-Professor,” Valjean gulped. “Who may those be?”

“You wish to know the specific names, Valjean Greatlorde? Well, I suppose there is no need to conceal it. In this classroom, the ones showing promise are... Hm, probably only Shuya Newkern.”

“Forgive my rudeness, but Sh-Shuya?!” Valjean was frothing at the mouth. I could tell that he had never expected that guy’s name to be mentioned.

Shuya hesitated. “To be honest, I really am not anyone worthy of taking notice of...”

“Shuya Newkern, you already understand that you are not a person of tremendous ability. You have a more objective eye than any of the other youths in this classroom. It’s an important trait and is what makes you stand out.”

Shuya was noticeably bashful at that. If this had happened before his time in the city of adventurers, he would have taken the chance to smugly brag about it to Valjean. However, it seemed that Shuya had indeed changed after his experiences in Zenelaus. It seemed as if he had become more mentally mature.

But, apparently, the professor wasn’t finished. “And the other one is *you*, Slowe Denning. I despise you, but your capabilities are the one thing about you that I must acknowledge.”

“Thanks, I suppose,” I muttered reluctantly.

“However, power alone is insufficient to carry out the duties of the Guardian Knight. Moreover, there are many in this school who admire and even aspire to become Royal Knights, but in my eyes, it seems that nearly none of you realize how demanding our duties are. The members of the Order of Royal Knights are the guards of the royal family. At times we are often given their dirty work to carry out, and I am no exception. I have been involved in missions so underhanded that I could never talk about them in front of you all.”

I didn’t dare interrupt and maintained my silence.

“I shall repeat myself once again. Slowe Denning, I do not consider you worthy of the position you were offered. Your behavior in class is an example of

that; you tend to take initiative to cause conflict. One could argue that yes, you are indeed very apt at sensing the seeds of danger, considering your history up until now. On top of that, you also are a man of action, willing to risk your own life back during the horde invasion here at Kirsch. However, the fact is, danger has always been present wherever you go.”

I suppressed all flickers of emotion in my heart and didn’t reply.

“If you become the Guardian Knight, I have a feeling that one day, such perils might even involve Princess Carina and harm her in the aftermath... Are these thoughts unfounded worries, I wonder?”

How can I get this through everyone’s thick skulls?! I wanted to shout furiously at her, to ask her to count the number of times I had declared that I had even wanted to become the Guardian Knight. The answer would be a big, fat zero.

I resisted the urge to praise myself for having managed to, once again, swallow down my fury that had nearly made me snap at Professor Yugiri.

Though the school seemed like the perfect picture of peace, I had heard mentions of students weighed down by trauma behind that superficial veil of calm. *I really admire people like Tina’s friend who can voluntarily admit that they are in pain. In any case, it’s impossible for me to do that. There’s no way I could ever confess that I actually don’t want to become the Guardian Knight, at least not on this campus.*

A kindly voice entered my ears. “May I take a seat next to you?”

“I believe that there isn’t anyone at this school who could ever deny your requests, Headmaster.”

The headmaster had a good-natured smile on his lips as he asked jovially, “Oh, is that so?”

However, he didn’t make further conversation with me after that. *I thought he was looking for me for a reason, but maybe I’m wrong? This whole time we’ve been sitting here, he’s been staring at the clouds drifting in the sky, just like I am. Does the headmaster have too much spare time on his hands too?*

Hah, no way.

A while later, the headmaster finally spoke up. “The mood in this school has finally gotten some semblance of peace back. Do you not agree?”

“I have only recently returned, so I am afraid that it’s hard to say...”

“When everyone first came back here, I saw so many stiff expressions on the students’ faces, especially the commoners. I am sure the event has left a profound impression on your memories as well... That was quite a harrowing experience.”

I hesitated. “I think it is unavoidable that some students came out traumatized after that.”

“Indeed. I wished to quell everyone’s insecurities in some way or another. I’ve made many trial-and-error attempts to realize my hopes, but unfortunately, luck has not smiled upon me so far. However, a recent event has changed things. An unexpected action by a certain person has resolved one of my worries.”

“Headmaster,” I began slowly. “May I ask you what business you have with me?”

“Slowe, a slight change of topic... To tell you the truth, the royal court has requested that I persuade you into taking up their offer.”

“That...is much more than a *slight* change of topic.”

Even the headmaster is in cahoots with them? The queen is way too interested in me...

“However, I know that coaxing from someone else would simply make you even more set in your ways.”

I stayed quiet, as it was the most honest way of expressing my feelings at the moment. *I have the feeling that this man knows what I really think: I truly, sincerely never want to become the Guardian Knight. But I had the feeling that knowing the headmaster, even if my heart was like an open book to him, he would let me speak my thoughts without interrupting me.*

Hearing my silence, the headmaster continued. “Take as long as you need to

mull over the matter. The fact that you are able to fret means that it is your choice to make.”

“Headmaster... Please just say it outright. I don’t have a choice, do I? If I want to continue living in this country, dismissing the queen’s decree would never be permitted, for I am a noble and someone who has benefited from that status.”

“Slowe, what is it about the Guardian Knight position that stirs such apprehension within you?”

“I...”

I have a dream. A childish dream for my future that I could never share with anyone: I want to be together with Charlotte forever and ever.

My voice trailed off as I was unable to continue my sentence.

But that’s a stupid, disgusting thought, isn’t it? After all, it’s a one-sided, selfish wish. It stems solely from my desires and completely disregards what Charlotte might feel on the matter.

If I think about it rationally, I’m no different from the queen, am I? To realize this dream, Charlotte would have to return my affections, but I haven’t even confessed my feelings yet! Forget thinking about the ending; I haven’t even arrived at the starting line of the race...

“I truly do not wish to force anything upon you. Let us speak about a different matter entirely then. Let me see... Ah, I must thank you for what you did in class recently. It seems that Yugiri has managed to have a slight change of heart, and you were the one who made that possible.”

“I haven’t really done anything, really. And, personally, I do not see how Professor Yugiri has changed.”

“Slowe, compared to Loco Moco, is Yugiri more difficult to get along with?”

“I believe that Professor Loco Moco was much more considerate and thoughtful about students under his charge.”

The headmaster let out a short laugh. “I see, I see. In recent years he may seem that way, but he was a mess when he first left the Order and became a professor. He let his fists do the talking when it came to punishment, and it was

a miracle for him to show up on time to his lectures. In fact, he had been such a terror that some of the students even protested and refused to attend his classes! Compared to the old Loco Moco, Yugiri is doing very well...or so I'd like to say, but nobody can argue the fact that she had been much too hasty when she had let that commoner student attempt a dual-element spell."

"Tina *is* talented, but she's greatly lacking in experience and technique. In the field of magic, there is only so much one can learn from studying textbooks and theory. Skill is earned slowly and steadily through repeated practice."

When it came to magic, Tina and Charlotte were polar opposites. Tina was the classic bright student who pored over textbooks and hammered theory into her head. If she were to figure out her own unique way of going about magic, she would probably become an awe-inspiring mage.

Meanwhile, Charlotte preferred practice to theory. Just like her performance back in the Denning lands, there was no stopping her from testing out a spell once she learned it. *And that was how my room's door disappeared, wasn't it?* I fought back the urge to sigh.

"There is one thing I wish to ask you, Slowe. Does that commoner girl hold a grudge against Yugiri?"

I paused before begrudgingly admitting, "No."

"May I ask what she had to say about the incident?"

"She said that it was her fault, not the professor's, because she was ultimately the one who had gotten cocky. To quote her, she said that after she'd learned that she had an aptitude for water magic, she had let it get a little to her head. Yes, Tina had been in grave danger due to the professor's inaction, but she didn't even have one bad thing to say about her...even though the professor was clearly the one in the wrong here."

Tina had taken Professor Yugiri's side in the end. She had even said that the professor had given her a warning and had taught her a good lesson about getting carried away. I didn't know why she had insisted on that. The professor had instructed Tina to test out a risky method and there had even been the very real possibility that the underclassman could sustain severe injuries. Yet, Tina had still said to me that Professor Yugiri wasn't a bad person. She said she was

even thankful to the professor, in fact!

“Do you know what kind of person Yugiri was when she was a student like you, Slowe?”

“Probably a person who thought that anything was fair game as long as she achieved her goals...or someone like that?”

I mean, well, from what I've seen from her, she's definitely not the kind of person I'd ever become friends with. She's a pampered young lady from a comital household, and she's even talented in magic. She probably was the type who would never even think about skipping out on lessons or getting into other kinds of trouble because she aimed to become a Royal Knight.

“Quite the opposite, actually. She was a gentle girl who treated everyone with kindness. However, under that gentleness was a will of steel. She was always enthusiastic about her dream, holding herself to a higher standard so that she could join the Order in the future and devote all of her abilities to the royal family. Of course, just as you pointed out, she was a little naive in certain matters, but overall, that was what she was like. Do you not agree that it is rather difficult to associate her past self with her present, Slowe?”

“Yes. I mean, Professor Yugiri and ‘gentle’ in the same sentence? I am afraid it is a little hard to imagine.”

“The Order of the Royal Knights is a whole world in itself, and it probably brought on such a significant change in Yugiri. It is a highly competitive world. In Yugiri's case, she may have felt a sense of inferiority because of her gender. I heard that after she set her eyes on becoming the Guardian Knight, she became aggressive at times. To further complicate things, she treasures Princess Carina like her own little sister. The title of Guardian Knight likely has much more weight to her, compared to most people.”

“Still... I do not think venting her anger on me is the right choice. It's not like I ever even said that I wanted to become the Guardian Knight.”

What she did today was a good example. Professor Yugiri announced that she despised me, you know? She treated me terribly, saying that someone like me couldn't protect Princess Carina. That's so mean! How could a teacher say something like that to a student's face? If my heart was made of glass, I'd be

locked up in my room putting the pieces back together right now.

I snorted dejectedly at the thought.

The school was peaceful. The danger Rooney had warned me about was nowhere to be found.

“He must be properly supervised. Isn’t it your role to guide him?! And now, you’re saying that he needs potions to lose weight? What kind of knight relies on potions for such a purpose?!”

During one of my internal grumbling sessions, I happened to overhear Professor Yugiri’s voice. *What is it this time? Who is she complaining about now?*

Professor Yugiri scolding someone was a very common sight around campus. In class, it felt as if she focused her fire on me the most and nagged for ages, but once she was outside, I often spotted her giving pep talks to or reprimanding Royal Knight hopefuls. She’d always bark lines like, “Do you really think you can become a member of the Order of Royal Knights by playing around all day?”

I looked towards the source of the commotion. For some reason, *Charlotte* was under fire this time. *There shouldn’t be any reason for those two to be together. Wait, is Professor Yugiri even being mean to Charlotte just because she’s my retainer?!*

“A Guardian Knight depending on potions is nothing but a laughingstock! Retainer, do you understand just how important a position that boy is—”

I threw my body between the pair and stood in front of Charlotte, panting. “Professor Yugiri!!! What...” I heaved, catching my breath. “...are you doing?!”

Charlotte was on the verge of tears. I continued, “Even if you dislike me to the extreme... May I request that you stop dragging my retainer Charlotte into this and treating her badly?”

The professor harrumphed after a pause. “If this is what your retainer is like, it is not difficult to imagine what kind of person her master is,” she said snidely.

Ah, here we go again. With blank, dead fish eyes, I let the professor's voice go in one ear and out the other as she droned on, and I occasionally added a gesture of affirmation here and there.

I began to consider just how wonderful it would feel to shout at the top of my lungs that I didn't want to become the Guardian Knight. *But knowing how high of a pedestal this professor places the royal family on... Even if my life depended on it, I could never admit to her that I'm not interested in the queen's offer.*

"Charlotte, you can go ahead and head back first," I muttered.

"O-Okay..."

Professor Yugiri *still* hadn't stopped her loud preaching about how honorable the Guardian Knight was and how important the position was to Daryth. *Once this woman flips her switch, she becomes completely deaf to everyone else... But!*

"Professor Yugiri, will that be all?"

"There was actually something else I wanted to talk to you about, Slowe Denning. You have been skipping my classes lately, have you not?"

I gulped. *Oh no. I have been evading all of her classes. She pretty much only calls on me each time, and there honestly aren't a lot of things I can learn from her. Nowadays, I've been repeatedly asked whether I would become the Guardian Knight so many times that I got fed up. I'm not the only one being a no-show in her classes though!*

"So you see yourself as special and above my teachings, do you? High and mighty, I see."

"That isn't what I am trying to say at all, really... Professor Yugiri, did you not skip classes when you were a student?"

"The thought never even came to my mind."

I expected as much. I can't even picture her doing anything improper like that! That reminds me, the headmaster mentioned that she had a change of personality because she joined the Order... Professor Yugiri from the schooling days, I beckon you here, please come back!

“Ah!” I exclaimed. “Look, Shuya is over there!”

“What?”

Shuya was another student who skipped Professor Yugiri’s classes and had avoided her like the plague for a while. However, his reasons were the complete opposite of mine. For some reason, the professor had taken a liking to Shuya, but it seemed that he was a little chagrined about that. Apparently, he wasn’t used to receiving praise and just couldn’t handle it.

That guy has changed a lot since he came back from Zenelaus though. He stopped telling fortunes with his crystal ball for cash, and he has also stopped talking to himself. I often catch him deep in thought, but with a quiet, steady fighting spirit seemingly burning within his body.

“What’s your opinion on the rumors? You know, the ones about the Piggy Duke of House Denning becoming the Guardian Knight?”

“I wasn’t convinced at all in the beginning, but Professor Yugiri’s a Royal Knight and she confirmed it, and just...wow. Someone in the same school year as us is going to become the Guardian Knight, huh?”

Guardian Knight this, Guardian Knight that... I could hear people talking about me in every corner. Kirsch was a small, isolated world, so any incident that caught people’s attention even slightly would become a hot topic for ages. These days, all I ever heard was those two words being repeated over and over again!

I’ll be frank, I don’t really like being the star of other people’s conversations. After all, I can’t help but pay attention! Without thinking, I halted in my tracks and ended up listening in on what my classmates were saying.

“But you know... If you look at it differently, you could say that the Piggy Duke has been abandoned by his family, don’t you think?”

“Huh? Why?”

“He might be ridiculously powerful, but aren’t people saying that he’s not welcome in House Denning? So I’m guessing the royal family was like, okay, *we’ll* take custody of him then! If you look at it that way, then you could say

that House Denning managed to wash their hands of the volatile Piggy Duke and gain even more influence in the royal court at the same time.”

“So that’s what you mean. But still...” The youth sighed wistfully. “He gets to become the Guardian Knight, yeah? He’s so lucky. That means he can be with the lovely Princess Carina forever!”

“Well, he can’t do anything more than that though. He would never be allowed to make a move on her! In my opinion, that sounds like torture, you know? Never being allowed to have what you want even though you’re constantly in their presence?”

Damn it. Have they ever heard of being considerate? They’re running their mouths as they please! I’d lose all semblance of freedom in exchange for the glory of being the Guardian Knight. Don’t they understand that? And true, Princess Carina may be cute, but my heart already belongs to someone! My only wish is to be with her forever and ever. That is all I ever want. I don’t need anything else!

“But if a guy like that becomes the Guardian Knight, he’d be the embarrassment of our country. He’s so round nowadays... I could never see how someone looking like that could ever be a knight!”

“Same. I swear I’m going to have a laughing fit if I see him in the white cape of the Order. Think about it! It would be the worst kind of awful!”

“You guys...” A voice interrupted the conversation. “You really should think before you speak.”

“Shuya? What’s with you? Don’t just barge into our conversation,” one of the youths grumbled.

Shuya frowned. “I think you should leave it at that. Have you two already forgotten about the incident that happened here? If that guy hadn’t been around, we’d all be dead and buried now.”

“I-I know that! We’re just joking around. You don’t have to take things so seriously. But wait, Shuya, that’s new. You don’t often stick up for the Piggy Duke.”

“Well, that’s because I think Denning is worthy of that title.”

Two stunned voices cried out in unison at the intrusion. “Huh?”

I immediately left the area after that.

Huh? Wait. What just? Shuya? Did that guy actually say I was worthy of the title of Guardian Knight? No way! Shuya, of all people? He’s practically my sworn enemy! My brain is a mess right now. Okay, Slowe, take deep breaths in and out and calm down.

Phew. All right, I’m calmer now. But I wonder why Shuya took my side earlier and even made such a statement...? That sounded like something that would not, and should not, ever come out of his mouth.

At a loss, I fell silent. I eventually managed to get over the shock and moved on to other thoughts. *Now then, I’m supposed to be in Professor Yugiri’s class right now, but surprise surprise, I don’t feel like showing up at all. As for why, well... After hearing what my schoolmates said, I guess their opinions are probably the norm. Becoming the Guardian Knight is a prestigious thing. Once again, I’m reminded that such self-centered thoughts like mine are rare in this country.*

I suppressed a sigh and found a place to sit down on the grass on the quieter side of the school building. I leaned back against the wall and slowly let myself slide down into a sitting position. There was probably mud on my bottom, but I could barely care about it.

A large group of maids passed in front of me, carrying heavy luggage. Whenever their eyes met the gaze of this resident sloth imitator, they would shrink into themselves as they walked on.

Somehow, it felt as if time had come to a standstill for me alone at that moment while everything else went on as normal.

I snorted weakly to myself.

After a while, I heard a sound from above me. *Hm?* It was the rattle of windows being opened slowly. Then, someone nimbly leaped down from above, and...failed their attempt at a smooth landing and fell over.

I couldn’t help but comment. “Lame.” Could anyone blame me? That person

did look pretty stupid while doing that.

“Ow ow ow ow...” The guy hissed.

It was Shuya. He didn’t bother getting up and slumped down next to me with a heavy thump. He didn’t even realize I was there next to him. And perhaps the universe was playing a sick joke on me because he ended up in the same position I was in. *What’s with him? Ugh, why is he sighing like that?*

After a few beats, Shuya yelped. “Ack! It’s you.”

Took him long enough. “Yo.”

Ugh, this is so awkward! It’s too much for me! And I just overheard him standing up for me moments ago. We haven’t even spoken to each other since that incident at Zenelaus. This guy had been fighting there and had mistakenly assumed that the Archflare had died, which in turn caused him to go berserk... And I know he doesn’t remember everything that happened after that.

“You’re supposed to be in Professor Yugiri’s class, right?” I muttered.
“Skipping today, Mister Model Student?”

“Oh, shut up; that has nothing to do with you. Speaking of that though, Denning, you’ve been missing way too many of the professor’s classes. She was pretty mad, you know.”

“She doesn’t like me, so it doesn’t matter. But if I remember correctly, the professor is fond of you, right?”

Shuya hesitated. “It’s more like the professor has an interest in foreign royalty. She’s trying to get on good terms with me and fish out details about Alicia so that she can make connections with other countries.”

“You serious? That woman sure is a Royal Knight through and through... Wait, Shuya, are you still in contact with Alicia now?”

“There’s no way I could keep in touch... It was my fault that Alicia could no longer be at Kirsch...”

Right, the official story was that this guy dragged Alicia to all kinds of foreign lands during the school’s reconstruction. And, well, the Cirquistan king was livid about Alicia’s thoughtless vacation. As a result, the pitiful second princess of

Cirquista is currently confined inside her own country.

But everything's fine because she's going to sneak out of her country and come to Kirsch, just like she did in the anime. After she did that, the war started, and many things happened between her and Shuya... Eventually, they would soften her dad's heart, and he would approve of these two.

"Alicia's probably doing all right. She isn't that frail. Don't forget that she's a daredevil who managed to go through *Huzak* with you. Sooner or later, she's bound to pop out of nowhere."

Shuya was tongue-tied for a moment. "What did you just... Denning... Why... Wh-Why do you know about *that*?!"

"Huh?"

Oh. Yikes! Shuya and Alicia's trip across Huzak to Zenelaus was meant to be a secret.

"Ah, well, I heard all about it from Alicia in Zenelaus. She mentioned you guys did a bunch of reckless stuff."

Shuya heaved a heavy sigh. "Seriously? She was the one who said that we should keep it a secret, but she went and did *that*...?"

Looks like I managed to worm my way out of that one. Phew.

"But you're right, Denning. This is Alicia we're talking about! There's no way she'd get depressed from something as minor as being confined to her home. Me worrying about it won't do her any good either."

Listen here, Shuya. The great heroine of the highly popular anime Shuya Marionette won't break that easily! In fact, she is probably vigilantly looking out for an opportunity to escape her home right about now...

"That aside, Shuya. What happened to that crystal ball you always carried around? Valjean mentioned that you quit telling fortunes too. What gives?"

"I leave it in my room nowadays. To tell you the truth, the guild master of Zenelaus told me that something wicked possessed it and that it's a dangerously powerful magic item."

"Ahh... That's how it is. I see."

So the guild master chose to deal with it that way. Shuya used to trust Eldred quite a lot, but after his idol warned him, that was enough to change the way he interacts with Eldred.

That means Eldred is left abandoned in Shuya's room, huh. Poor guy. I should light a candle for him. The Great Spirit of Fire has been reduced to nothing more than room decor.

I wonder what he's thinking right now. I borrowed his power to defeat one of the Three Musketeers, so I feel a bit of pity for him, but that guy's terrifying. Maybe that's for the best.

I'm relieved though. It looks like the Zenelaus incident didn't leave any sort of warped, lasting trauma on Shuya. I heard that there were students left with deep, terrible scars in their hearts after the horde invasion, but well, I suppose this guy isn't the sort to be hurt by something like that.

"Oh, right, Denning. This is just my opinion, and I know that Professor Yugiri has been bothering you forever about it, but I think that you really should become—"

A loud voice cut the young man off. "I have finally found you, Shuya Newkern! Hm?! Slowe Denning! You were here too?!"

Hearing the yelling, I looked up.

"Ack!" Shuya sounded startled. "Professor Yugiri!"

I spotted the professor glaring daggers at us from above, through the classroom window Shuya had jumped out of earlier. If looks could kill, we would have been long dead from those furious eyes. Then, in stark contrast to Shuya's clumsy showing, the professor made a spectacle of landing lightly on her feet in front of us.

In response to Professor Yugiri's sudden appearance, Shuya and I chose to do the exact same thing: flee!

We sprinted around the campus in an attempt to escape from our professor..

"Shuya!" I yelled. "What were you trying to say earlier?"

“I’ve got a better question! Why are you following me, Denning?!”

“Shut up! You’re the one who copied me! You should go lure her away! You know just how *well* I get along with the professor! I’m willing to bet that I’m not going to have fun if she catches me!”

“You think I’d say yes to that?!”

“If that’s your answer, we’re going to split up here! No hard feelings no matter who the professor ends up chasing!” I shouted.

I had found myself running side by side with *Shuya*, who had been on the worst terms with me in the anime. Despite that, this felt oddly exhilarating.

But if this keeps up, people will assume that Shuya and I are buddies! That’s not a good thing at all. We are Shuya Newkern and Slowe Denning, sworn enemies in the anime. We loathed each other up to the bitter end, and things were so bad that when I had been banished from House Denning, he seemed pleased as if I was getting my just deserts. But now...

Shuya paused, then yelled back, “Fine, I get it, Denning! I’ll lure her away!”

My eyes widened. “Huh?! Shuya, you...”

Though I didn’t have any evidence, there was only one possible reason why this guy would willingly become a decoy for my sake: the incident in Zenelaus.

“With this...we’re even, you hear me?!”

But wait a minute, I helped him so much in Zenelaus, but he’s going to say we’re even with just this? Isn’t that way too shameless?!

The sudden and shocking closeness between Shuya and me was a sign that the world was indeed making steady progress towards peace. *It’s not like I even have the tiniest intention of getting chummy with Shuya, but, well, that’s just how things are. Thanks to Shuya playing the part of a scapegoat and letting the professor catch him, I’m now able to take a leisurely walk.*

After the reconstruction, Kirsch had more beautiful, stroll-worthy places than ever before. Perhaps because of that, unfortunately, I would end up running into scenes like *this*.

“Christina! Please... Please go out with me!” a youth exclaimed.

I had witnessed a declaration of love happening right at the foot of the clock tower that Tina had introduced to me earlier.

“Christina, I swear that I will make you happy with everything I have!”

I was speechless. *These guys...* I had skipped classes due to a lack of motivation and energy, but this pair had immediately depleted all my energy reserves in a completely different manner. *I think I reached my limit when the girl meekly replied, “Yes... The same goes for me...” At this point...I don’t know what to say other than to wish them a happy future. I’m the one who most desperately wants to become happy though...*

The girl blushed. “Thank you... To be honest, I’ve also liked you for a long time...”

“Huh? Oh! I had no idea at all, ha ha... I’m so glad I worked up the courage to confess to you.”

Actually, I do deserve to become happy! I should be rewarded more! I saved the world, you know?! I want to be just like that guy at the clock tower. What does he have that I lack?

I racked my brain for the answer. *That’s right. Courage. That guy said it himself. He taught me a valuable lesson. What the heck am I doing?! I never cared about the Guardian Knight or other complicated stuff like that in the first place. I only ever wanted to live happily with Charlotte, and that was supposed to be all.*

“Master Slowe, what was it that you wanted to talk to me about?” Charlotte asked.

“Umm... First of all, Charlotte, sorry about calling for you this late.”

I didn’t have superpowers. For a moment, I thought of the Dream Dealer Witch in the anime, who could peep into minds and read thoughts. Brainwashing Charlotte and controlling her as I pleased was something I would never do, and it was even more out of the question.

“Is it something urgent? This was very sudden...”

I hesitated. The mood wasn't romantic or heart-racing at all. It was probably because Charlotte was wearing her everyday maid uniform, as well as the particularly ordinary scents and environment surrounding us.

We were behind the dining hall. Smoke from the ovens rose out of the window, and the delightful fragrance of food wafted our way, which didn't help things.

This is hard... Charlotte's thoughts on me becoming the Guardian Knight is a really difficult topic to bring up. I'm worried that Charlotte would think that I'm a guy who doesn't have my own will or that I'm indecisive. But I want to clearly hear how she feels about everything once again, so...

“Uh, well... Just asking, Charlotte, but do you kind of share the same opinion as everyone in House Denning and at Kirsch...? By any chance, do you agree that I should become the Guardian Knight?”

“Do you even have to ask? Master Slowe, nobody is more fitting for the noble Guardian Knight than you!”

I was struck speechless. *Please don't look as if I asked you something absurd! Don't show me such a brilliant, sparkling smile!* I begged her in my mind.

“M-May I ask why...?”

“Think about it, Master Slowe. It's the *Guardian Knight* we're talking about! An important representative and symbol of Daryth! Not only that, but the queen directly nominated you! That's proof showing that Her Majesty doesn't only acknowledge your abilities, she also considers your disposition to be excellent, and on top of that, even everyone in House Denning is celebrating the news as a delight!”

Whoa! Did she even stop to catch her breath there?! But that aside...I'm sure that Charlotte really believes in what she's saying...

“Y-Yeah... The Guardian Knight is a symbol of Daryth...”

“Princess Carina seems like she trusts you enough to confide in you, which also makes you the best candidate, aaaaaand I'm not finished yet!” Charlotte

lowered her voice. “This isn’t something I should say to other people, but if you become the Guardian Knight, you will always be by the queen’s side. That means you wouldn’t have to live on the battlefield like everyone else in House Denning! It’s safe!”

Ch-Charlotte... So she even took my safety into consideration for this, huh...?

“And that is why you should trim down, Master Slowe! After all, it would be hard for an overly chubby Guardian Knight to keep his head held up high! Not only that, but part of the reason why you were allowed back here was that you were able to successfully lose weight at school!”

I hesitated. “You’re right. If I was back home, I could never work up the motivation to lose weight...”

“Master Slowe!”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Everyone has discovered how amazing you are. That’s why the queen nominated you for the title. It just makes sense. You’re too outstanding to stay within the limited confines of House Denning!”

“Oiiink...”

The glory of the title of Guardian Knight was making everyone delirious. *It’s a key position and there’s only one in this entire country, so I get where they’re coming from, but...could they please take some of my feelings into consideration too? It almost feels like they’re cornering me and progressively closing off every other option I have, leaving me with no choice.*

I let out a groan in my mind. *I mean, I knew this was going to happen. I knew that Charlotte was going to tell me to charge forward for my sake, with only the best of intentions for me in her heart. But hearing her actually declare it so firmly...ha ha. I guess my feelings are unrequited, huh?*

“Wait, Master Slowe. Are you perhaps not a big fan of Princess Carina or something?”

I denied that as resolutely as I could. “Wh-Wh-What?! No way!”

Me disliking Princess Carina or hating her? That’s impossible. Nobody could

ever feel that way towards her. Being able to accompany such a beautiful girl would be paradise on earth. Ah, but watching Princess Carina marry someone else one day would be a little, no, very unpleasant.



“Then why are you so indecisive about it, Master Slowe?”

I didn’t know how to reply to that, and there was a momentary silence.

“On my end, I’m elated that you received the queen’s acknowledgment, Master Slowe.”

“Thank you, Charlotte. I hear you and I know your stance on things now.”

It’s more than enough. Unlike those guys in House Denning, she isn’t saying this out of her own self-interest. She is wholeheartedly rejoicing in the fact that the queen approved of me. Watching over the path that the Country of Knights treads together with Princess Carina, huh? Perhaps that future isn’t so bad after all.

Actually, it’s not bad at all, right? All the students are envious of me, so that must mean something...

I let out a dry laugh as I languidly looked up at the night sky. I could see the stars, countless in number, shining down upon me, giving their blessings— *As if. That doesn’t sound right to me at all.*

A bitter sound escaped my throat. My body felt like lead. After my conversation with Charlotte, everything around me seemed to turn dull and I couldn’t care less. It felt as if a gaping hole had opened up in my chest.

To put it simply, I had been rejected. Charlotte had clearly said that I should accept the queen’s offer.

Becoming the Guardian Knight was the same as becoming a solitary man for the rest of my life. All freedom would be taken away from me. Each of the previous Guardian Knights had devoted their lives to the royal family and never married.

“Lord Denning, what are you doing?”

“Oh, Tina. You look like you’re in a good mood. Did something brighten up your day?” She looked a little gleeful—a stark contrast to me right now.

“Well, I was able to run into you at such a late hour of the night. Isn’t that reason enough?”

My heart didn't even skip a beat at those words because it was so hollow; a chilly wind howled as her words blew across the cavity in my chest. "In that case, I'd be eternally grateful if you could redistribute some of that happiness to me, Tina."

"Gladly! You see, my friend who was considering quitting school is going to stay!"

Oh right, Tina mentioned that before. Her roommate had been traumatized by the monster incident. At night, her roommate would have flashbacks to the terrifying experience and have a hard time falling asleep.

Her roommate is only one of many. That incident had been especially hard on commoners, who didn't have the ability to fight back, and it left a lasting shadow in their hearts.

Kirsch may be a school that teaches magic, but not all spells are for combat purposes. Young women from commoner families tend to study magic with the intent of working towards a more fruitful future. They come to this school so that they can have better partner selections for marriage, or so that they can gain the ability to earn a living independently.

"And *this* is the potion that helped your friend, huh?"

"I don't know much about the typical price of soothing water, but I thought that you might be able to better gauge its worth."

"Yeah, I can. Could I borrow that for a bit?"

Tina had taken out a small bottle filled with liquid and had shown it to me. It was a certain type of water elixir that had effectively helped her friend overcome her trauma.

I tilted the bottle and the liquid glowed with a dim light. This was a soothing elixir infused with water magic. *But this...* I frowned. *This thing definitely didn't come through proper channels.*

I opened the lid of the bottle and checked its contents. It wasn't an item of inferior quality. In fact...

"A remarkably skilled water mage made this," I muttered slowly. "To think

that your friend could obtain such a work of art...”

“After drinking this, my friend regained her spirits! So it’s just like I thought; it *is* something amazing.”

I wondered where her friend had gotten her hands on this, but I didn’t really feel like asking her for too many details. *Still, the creator must have been a really kind person. This potion almost definitely wasn’t provided by our infirmary. This is a very high-quality soothing water. I could understand if this belonged to an influential noble, but not a commoner student.*

On top of that, according to Tina, this water elixir managed to ease their traumas. If someone tried to get their hands on something like this in the capital, it would probably burn a sizable hole in their wallet. This type of thing could cost as much as an entire house!

Hmm, did someone supply this to students through unofficial channels? Someone who is in the know about the school’s internal affairs and the students’ anxieties?

“Lord Denning, unlike everyone else, you’re practically the picture of gloom right now.”

It took me a long time before I could reply to Tina. “You think so?”

“Very, verrry much so. You were standing all alone in a place like this! It totally feels like the air around you is several times heavier than everywhere else.”

“Sorry. I might have even ruined your good day, Tina...”

“In that case, I guess I can tell you something that will cheer you up a little. Lord Denning, did you know that Miss Charlotte has been assisting Professor Yugiri recently?”

“Huh? I...I didn’t.”

“Miss Charlotte said that she was going to buy a weight-loss potion for you. I hear that she’s been working very hard every day!” After seeing no reaction from me, Tina sounded puzzled. “Strange, I thought you would feel better after hearing that, but... Hmm...”

It's not like I'm eager about losing weight, so... Tina's words didn't just fail to cheer me up; they poured salt into my wound. After all, Charlotte had only been trying so hard because she wanted me to become the Guardian Knight.

"I'll be blunt then, Lord Denning. You seem as if you are the last person who wants to accept the queen's offer."

"Oh, wow... I'm surprised you figured that out."

"To tell you the truth, I've known for a long time. I think it's very obvious to people who observe you closely, Lord Denning. Well, it might escape their attention if that someone is *too* close to you though."

Ah, that reminds me, the headmaster seemed as if he had already caught on to that in our last meeting too. However, he is a wise person with many years of experience, and can easily see past facades. I wouldn't be surprised if he could read me like a book.

But Tina is different. She's a student like me, so I honestly never anticipated that she would correctly deduce what's really on my mind. We nobles are sometimes dense when we're at Kirsch since we're at the top of the hierarchy and can be more careless. It's just a guess on my part, but as a commoner, Tina probably survived up until now by paying close attention and perceiving what goes on around her.

"I see... You had me all figured out, huh?" I muttered tiredly.

"Yup. Like right then, your tone was very flat," Tina commented.

"I guess I'm just completely spent... Just now, I thought that I might be at my limit."

"This is just what I think, but... If I were ever forced into a situation like what you are experiencing, I would have buckled under the pressure long ago."

"Really?"

"Everyone has no filter and is cruelly saying whatever they want, after all. You might not know this from being in the eye of the storm yourself, but it wouldn't be an understatement to say that you are the talk of the school right now."

"Oh, I know that."

“It is probably even worse than you think.” Here, Tina hesitated. “To be honest, there have been a few times that I pitied you.”

My eyes widened. “Pitied me?”

“I mean, everyone is shoving way too much pressure onto your shoulders. Sure, you are a little talented in magic—well, *very* talented in magic—but...isn’t that the *only* thing that separates you from other people? Otherwise, you’re normal like the rest of us, but with an unreasonable burden on your shoulders. After that horrible incident, you’ve suddenly been forced to consider becoming the Guardian Knight...”

I stayed quiet, waiting for Tina to go on.

“I, well... I don’t really understand the duties of nobles or customs that bind you, but leaving your own future to someone else really doesn’t suit you. Lord Denning, how about you run away with me? Declare that we don’t care a hoot about this country’s problems? You might turn out surprisingly happy if you do that, you know?”

Throwing away all excessive burdens and leaving this country with Tina was an attractive offer. She was a cheerful girl and she cared about me. Her offer was lighthearted, and it might have been just a joke on her part, but I had been really happy when I had heard it.

I never thought that I had someone like her nearby...someone who could put themselves in my shoes and actually respect my opinions. *She always, always brightens up my day without fail.*

“It might surprise you that your allies are closer than you think, Lord Denning. If you want to run away, you should try asking around and seeing who would come with you. By the way, I would welcome the opportunity with open arms. See? One ally right here! Are you feeling a bit better now?”

“Thank you, Tina,” I said gratefully. “This all feels much lighter thanks to you.”

I could never choose to run away from this country. After all...a certain girl is here.

The curtains haven’t even risen on the main event yet. I knew what had happened in the anime and interfered with the course of the future. But before I

knew it, I strayed far from my original goal, and my situation changed too. What I truly need to do hasn't changed at all, however.

I nearly repeated the same mistake as the anime's Piggy Duke and was this close to walking down the same path...

I continued, "It's not that I have decided to become the Guardian Knight, but... I'll start working on losing weight for real."

Someone paid enough attention to me to notice what was actually on my mind. Just that fact alone is making me over the moon right now!

This isn't the time to be stubborn. I can't keep this up forever.

Plus, unless I take the initiative to talk to that certain girl, there's no way she would ever know.

Choosing what I want to do about the Guardian Knight offer is one thing, but more importantly, I haven't even told that girl how I feel. Compared to Tina attempting a dual-element spell, I am such a good-for-nothing pig.

I smiled wryly and explained, "Because I think that's what I need to do right now."

Now that I'm facing forward again, there's a whole new world ahead of me.

I'm not doing this to become the Guardian Knight. I'm doing this for my own sake.

But the next day, as I was trembling like crazy during my sitting-on-air workout in class, someone said the most peculiar thing...

"There was an envoy from the Dustour Empire! Apparently, they came bearing an official notice declaring that Dustour won't invade the south for the next hundred years!"



Yugiri's trips into the forest were always during the dead of night.

"Fran, you're here, aren't you? It's me, Yugiri! Come out!"

Potion dealers were not tolerated in the country of Daryth. While these

magicians provided water elixirs for free, their healing abilities weren't the only thing they were offering to their patients. In the south, the Potion Dealer Association was known as a group of dubious magicians who used patients as test subjects for water magic. As a Royal Knight, Yugiri could not leave such a person unwatched.

"Ah, Yugiri. I see you have come again. You are a noble of the Country of Knights, and a Royal Knight at that, and yet..."

"Today, I came here to thank you."

"Thank...me?"

Despite all of the reasons not to, Yugiri had come here countless times and had talked all night with this woman living in the desolate ruins deep in the forest. This was a place from which both people and animals shied away. As the two women were both highly skilled water magicians, they never ran out of topics to discuss, whether it be methods of potion brewing or sharing gripes about acquaintances.

"Yes, I wanted to thank you for the potion you made! I tested it out a little myself and then gave some to the students. It worked wonders. Some commoner students were considering quitting school, but they said that after taking your potion, they were able to sleep again at night and that their lingering terrors have begun to fade."

"I am glad to hear that! But I must say, Yugiri... Was it really all right for you to give my potions to the students? I must seem like quite the suspicious one to you..."

"That isn't a matter of concern for me, Fran. It is also thanks to your potion that I was able to keep a clear mind during my probation. For that, I am very thankful."

"Yugiri, a person of your character would never need to rely on something like a soothing potion. Even if you didn't have my aid, you would have climbed back up by yourself. Of that I am sure."

This potion dealer who had taken up residence here in the lifeless forest ruins always wore a vacant look on her face. Her mind seemed as if it was

somewhere else and it was difficult to get a read on her, but the woman never failed to have a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. To Yugiri, the woman almost felt like a priestess.

“Fran, the soothing potions you make are truly works of art. Your ability to manipulate water magic to soothe one’s heart is a skill level that I could never reach. Are you still unwilling to tell me where you studied this craft?”

The woman hesitated. “I can only say that it would be better for the both of us that you refrain from asking.”

“I see. That is a shame, but I shall not inquire further. However, I hope that I have successfully expressed my gratitude to you.”

“You don’t have to feel so indebted, Yugiri. I am a potion dealer, after all. I’ve been profiting from this as well since I was able to double-check my potions’ effects on people. Our exchanges are also invaluable to me. A lone, wandering potion dealer like myself has never thought that I would be able to speak with someone like you, a Royal Knight, like equals. I am sure that I shall never forget our talks together.”

“I feel the same way, Fran,” Yugiri said with deep emotion. “This has been the first time that I met someone who can understand me this well.”

“You have it hard, Yugiri. Your superiors gave you a task completely out of your league. But I must say, you look as if you are a lot more motivated than before.”

“Do you really think so?” Yugiri muttered slowly with an uncertain tone in her voice.

In the beginning, Yugiri had thought that she wasn’t cut out to be a professor. However, as time passed, she had gradually begun to understand why she had been dispatched from the Order to Kirsch in Loco Moco’s place.

“Fran, I shall be honest with you. It’s all because I’ve followed your advice. I’ve looked past my biases to try to find out more about that boy. Instead of speaking with just the outstanding noble students, I’ve made an effort to talk to the commoner students at Kirsch as well. After I expanded my reach, I was able to gradually piece together a completely different side of him, one which I had

been oblivious about.”

When she had first arrived at Kirsch, Yugiri had been utterly mystified by the queen’s nomination. After the youth had returned to campus, he had seemed to enjoy living a life of sloth, just like the rumors she had previously heard. Yugiri couldn’t imagine such a youth accompanying Princess Carina for the rest of his life as the princess’s sword.

However, when she had begun to ask people of varying standings about him, the answers she had gotten painted a picture that was astoundingly at odds with her own impression of the boy after she had met him in person. At the very least, she had learned that one day, the boy had suddenly become a much more kindhearted fellow than the rumors had made him out to be. Yugiri had only managed to learn so much after taking the advice of this potion dealer named Fran.

“That is a good thing, Yugiri. It is also evidence that you have started to have more peace of mind yourself.”

“Peace of mind... You might be right. When I first came to this school, I was completely in the dark about everything and had no idea what I ought to do.”

“But I am still concerned, Yugiri. A Royal Knight consorting with a potion dealer of the north is problematic, no matter what you say. These ruins will not be left forgotten forever. Perhaps it might be best if we part ways soon.”

“With such magnificent abilities in healing and soothing magic, you could probably make ends meet no matter where you go. Fran, I could give you a few offers of employment that would suit you. Would you consider working in the Country of Knights?”

“Thank you very much for being so considerate, but I am afraid I have to decline. You are a strange one indeed, giving such an offer to a stray wanderer like me.”

“You are far too humble. A person with your skills would be regarded highly anywhere. But I hear you, and if that is against your wishes, I shall push no further. Is there anything I can do for you though?”

“In that case, Yugiri, I do have one request.”

“You do?” Yugiri perked up. “If it’s something within my capabilities, I promise that I will definitely grant anything you say!”

Before she knew it, Yugiri had begun to place a significant amount of trust in this nonconformist woman. Thus, Yugiri was willing to grant the wishes of this friend if she could, even if Fran was considered heretical in this country. Despite the potion dealer’s unknown background, the Royal Knight had come to deeply confide in her.

“I remember you had mentioned a noble with a retainer who sought out a weight-loss potion. Could you bring her here?”

The blunder that Yugiri made was that she foolishly assumed this highly skilled woman was a person of little importance and threat. It had never even crossed her mind that the founder of the Potion Dealer Association, with adherents all over the continent, would be in Daryth of all places, peddling potions.

Failing to make the connection that this woman was one of the Three Musketeers of the Dustour Empire, Francisca, would be the cause of Yugiri’s downfall.

Chapter 4: In the Shadow of the Festival

My breaths came in and out of my mouth as pants in a steady rhythm.

For a long time, the political climate of the continent had been balancing on a knife's edge, and the north had been on the brink of starting a war with the south. However, I had known how the Great Spirit of Darkness operated. I'd been confident that the empire would withdraw their troops from the front lines in the Grant Wetlands. In the end, my prediction had come true.

Ever since that information had become common knowledge at school, the students had gone crazy and practically just partied all day. I heaved another sigh as I tuned into the conversations around me.

"Hey, did you hear what the headmaster said?!"

"No classes next week!"

"The great merchant Warren has—"

"Rich people really do things on a different scale, huh! They probably want to curry favor with nobles like us!"

Some upperclassmen had been eagerly boasting about rising up the ranks in the army if there was a war, but most of the students here had dreaded a conflict and hoped that peaceful days would continue.

The students at Kirsch weren't the only people heartened by the Dustour Empire's decision. From what I had heard, the entire southern half of the continent was welcoming it with open arms, and there were celebrations all around.

"Classes are suspended next week! There's going to be a festival!"

"Apparently, every single town in Daryth is in a festive mood right now!"

"We ain't got time for studying!"

Everyone talked about the future with cheerful looks on their faces. There was no stopping the whispering among students during classes.

Well, as a matter of fact, calling it a festive mood isn't exactly accurate, because a real festival is going to happen! Apparently, a student from a wealthy commoner merchant family managed to convince the headmaster into holding one, and it's set to happen next week. I must say, they do have amazing event planning skills, but I'm still surprised the headmaster gave them permission...

The headmaster's charismatic attitude was probably what made students here idolize him so much. Just as I mulled over this, that very man walked right by me. I decided to ask him just what truly was on his mind.

"Stress has been running rampant on this campus, and I hoped a festival could help improve matters on that front."

Nice one, headmaster!

The older man then addressed me. "Slowe, I've heard that you have once again started putting effort into losing weight... Have you perhaps made up your mind?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes. I've decided to trim down again, so I've started working out. Now, if you will excuse me..."

"I see..."

The headmaster looked like there was more he wanted to say. Does he have an opinion about me losing weight or something? I mean, I won't be surprised; anyone with eyes can tell that I'm obese again. After I came back to school, a bunch of people might have said something to me, but I didn't really pay attention to them. However, things have changed recently. By pure chance, I looked into the mirror in my room, and I finally realized the truth: I'm extremely fat!

The chatter around me didn't stop.

"They say the peace treaty lasts a hundred years."

"You were pretty pumped about becoming a soldier though. What are you going to do now?"

"I'll keep working towards something that will benefit my family. I think I'll work on making a new variety of cuisine and make a killing off that."

“I suppose the first thing on *my* list is getting a girlfriend.”

“You know, a lot has happened recently, so...”

I’m not in as bad physical shape as back in those blackhearted Piggy Duke days, but I’m only three steps away from rebounding completely. To be frank, I’m in hot water! I can’t believe how much I fattened myself up again to try to escape the title of Guardian Knight.

“Hey, that looks tasty! Where did you buy that?” a student yelled to another.

“I got it for free at the dining hall! It’s a new creation by the head chef!”

I shook my head repeatedly. *I can’t hear them. I can’t hear them at all*, I chanted in my mind.

Some people had probably saved up a small fortune in preparation for future use by diligently putting aside their pocket money, but they would likely blast a spectacular hole into that sum by exhausting it during the festival next week. There might even be some who planned on emptying their entire fortune. *But it’s only natural. The withdrawal of the Dustour troops was that significant.*

Meanwhile, I was feeling very pleased with myself. It felt as if all my efforts were bearing fruit.

Now, keep up the steady and rhythmic breathing, oinking...I mean, jogging. I am a man of steel, not easily fazed by others. I mustn’t get carried away by the atmosphere like everyone else. They’re all excited about the festival. But me? Right now, I have a big dream I want to realize! It’s as important to me as nipping that war in the bud!

Charlotte ran up to me. “I finally found you, Master Slowe! Um... What are you doing?”

“Hey, Charlotte. It’s exactly what it looks like. I’m in the middle of my workout.”

“Huh? But it’s a special day today. I think it would be all right if you took things easy for just this one day...”

The entire path before me was littered with food stalls and street vendors, all preparing for the festival that would begin next week. Some hasty merchants

looked to be already selling things in secret, and all the good locations were already taken.

“I’m serious about losing weight right now, Charlotte, so I can’t.”

But I repeat, I am a man of steel! A titanic selection of delectable food will appear at the festival, I’m sure. There will also be many wonderful events...but I won’t spare any attention towards those! They’re simply obstacles on my path to a slim body. Now that I have hardened my resolve, I would never, ever lose to such lowly temptations.

“I bought your favorites though, Master Slowe... I thought that there would never again be a day like today, and I...”

“Huh?!”

Who would have thought that Charlotte—of all people—would say that?! How terrifying. I must not underestimate the influence of the Dustour Empire! The frighteningly strict Weight Loss Sergeant Charlotte is actually leading me astray! But I know better. Letting my guard down even in the slightest would only lead to my destruction.

“I recognized that the one thing I lack right now is self-control. I’m very happy that you went so far for me, Charlotte, but please enjoy that in my stead. I’m already full just from seeing all the delight on everyone’s faces.”

Charlotte didn’t reply, but instead... *Hey, why is she pinching her own cheek? This isn’t a dream; it’s reality!*

“M-M-Ma—” she stammered.

“Ma...?” I repeated after her.

“Master Slowe!!!”

“Wh-What, Charlotte? Why did you suddenly grab my hand?!”

“I am so moved! Just like I thought, you are such a wonderful person, Master Slowe!”

I harrumphed, preening at the praise. “It’s nothing to be surprised about, really. I was allowed back in the first place because I once succeeded at losing weight here, so you know, it’s no big deal,” I said with a sparkling smile on my

face. Charlotte looked even more surprised at that.

To be honest, it took a rather lengthy amount of time before I could think in this way. Due to things like the offer of Guardian Knight, nothing went my way for the longest time.

If I think about it though, it's only natural that none of my wishes are being heard. I completely rewrote the fate of the world. If I look at things from the perspective of No Face, who I threw into a prison, or even Sepith, meeting me was probably a much more unfortunate fate for those two than the original timeline.

Oh, that reminds me, I need to tell Charlotte something. After talking to Tina the other day, I realized one thing, and that is...

"That aside, Charlotte, don't worry about working for Professor Yugiri so you can afford that weight-loss potion. I think you're overworking yourself right now."

Charlotte froze for a moment as she processed what I had said. "Master Slowe, you knew about that?!"

"From the rumors I've heard, being Professor Yugiri's assistant is very taxing, right? I'm elated that you're doing this for my sake, but I'm going to lose weight through my own hard work. You really don't have to."

I had known that Charlotte had been pursuing a weight-loss potion to aid me. However, I didn't want to rely on such a thing. *It almost sounds like cheating, and that's lame! I want to battle the fat on my body with my own efforts.*

I voiced out my thoughts and Charlotte's eyes teared up.

"I wish Madam Mallow was around to hear that! I'm sure that she'd cry tears of joy!"

I shook my head. "That old lady, crying? Impossible!"

"But Madam Mallow dotes on you as if you were her own grandson!" Charlotte argued.

If she really did think that, there's no way she'd tell me to become the Guardian Knight! If I agreed to the offer, my status as a member of House

Denning would be revoked, and I would never be able to visit her freely again, after all. But, well...grumbling about that to Charlotte won't do any good.

"About that, Charlotte..." I trailed off.

Meeting up with her here gave me a good opportunity. Right now, the entirety of Kirsch is walking on air. With this pumped-up atmosphere around me, I might actually be able to work up the courage to tell Charlotte how I feel.

I hesitated. "After I slim down through my own efforts, there's something I want to tell you."

Of course, telling her right here, right now would be impossible. Never, not a chance, oink!!! I was the shy, blackhearted Piggy Duke who suppressed all my feelings, remember? But I did it! I managed to take the first step and say that I want to tell her something!

I sighed to myself wistfully as I thought back on the day's events.

That night, I slept ridiculously well. It was probably because I was able to release some of the emotions that had been stashed away in my heart for ages. Even if my confession fell flat in the near future, I wouldn't mind. I was on cloud nine solely because I was able to work up the courage to start to voice my feelings.

I was tense, but this feeling was completely different than how I had felt when facing a strong opponent in battle. *Get a grip, me... Thinking back on it though, that pair of lovebirds pledging their love to each other under the clock tower a while ago were admirable.*

"Do not completely lose control of yourselves to the festive ambiance. This is a reminder that classes are suspended starting next week, not right now. What a curious day though... I see that everyone is present today for some reason. A rare occurrence indeed."

Though the whole school was partying, Professor Yugiri had the same surly look on her face as always as she began her lecture. *Is this what I think it is? I half suspect that she has a heart of stone.*

Today's lecture was the same old thing. With a textbook in one hand, the

professor relentlessly called upon one student after another and picked on their ignorance. *I thought even she might be a little affected by the cheerful mood on campus, but it seems that she has no interest in enjoying the festivities or cutting loose at all.*

“You over there, be quiet. Unlike that man who was your previous professor, I remember clearly telling you all that I will *not* tolerate any talking during class in my first lecture.”

A while back, I remember the headmaster mentioning how Professor Yugiri was meeker and gentler as a student. Hmm...I still can't imagine that at all. Is the life of a Royal Knight so ruthless that it completely warped the professor's original personality beyond recognition?

“Slowe Denning, I suppose I shouldn't have expected any less. Theory is your specialty, after all. You have studied very well in this field. All of you, learn from his example. He has a deep understanding of the biology of the most common type of Noctilucales marine plankton, which can be used as a light source in an emergency. You probably would struggle to find someone with this knowledge at the ready, even among the Royal Knights.”

She...praised me? Professor Yugiri? Willingly? What? Usually, she'd throw a few cutting remarks in my direction, but now... Ugh, I hope she'll stop doing stuff that throws me off balance!

“Why the strange expression, Slowe Denning?” she asked.

“N-No, it's nothing...”

“Let me guess. You were probably expecting me to make a snide comment or something along those lines, am I correct?”

“Um, well... Yes.” *Oh. Oops. That just slipped out...*

“Even someone like me cannot stop my mood from brightening because of the current climate in this country. The peace treaty offered by the Dustour Empire is indeed something to celebrate. And I believe we owe it all to House Denning, who have worked tirelessly in the Grant Wetlands to negotiate with the empire. Slowe Denning, the Order and House Denning may be in charge of

different affairs, but I am not blind to the praiseworthy aspects of both our factions.”

She...what? A Royal Knight praising House Denning? Is magic projectile rain on the forecast for tomorrow or something? She has an aloof expression on her face, but she's definitely in a good mood!

“Though it is a little early, class will end here today. I know that you all cannot wait for the holidays starting next week, but you are getting too restless. Do try to be quieter and compose yourselves today.”

She even took our feelings into consideration. Wow. I could even name today Hyper Professor Yugiri Day, a date that only comes around once a year, to commemorate.

A student asked, “Excuse me, Professor Yugiri, I have a question! I heard that Professor Loco Moco is going to return to Kirsch... Is that true?”

Huh? He is? That's the first I've heard of that!

“Well... Where do I start...” the professor mused.

The professor didn't deny it either. Wait, wait, when was that rumor going around? Ah, well, I'm pretty slow to catch on to stuff like that, to be honest. My friend count is pretty low, after all. I mean, Professor Yugiri was meant to be a temporary replacement while Professor Loco Moco was on break in the first place. I knew that she was going to leave eventually, but...it's all very sudden.

“Some of you might already know this, but Professor Loco Moco will return to Kirsch next week,” she announced.

Professor Loco Moco is well-known for many things, and one of them is being a party person. I can't help but think that it's very fitting for him to come back just as the school festival begins. Hm, wait, that means...

“I was dispatched to this school in Loco Moco Highland's place. Thus, I will resign from being a professor at Kirsch Mage Institute next week. A select number of you might be overjoyed by that news, but—”

Hey! Why are you looking at me as you say that? Do you think I'd react in any other way? Have you forgotten how often you pester me? However, I bet the

professor's probably pretty relieved about it too. She can finally leave this school and return to the Order, after all.

“Being able to get to know you all was an invaluable experience in my life. Distancing myself from my post, albeit only for a short while, helped me remember why I first decided to walk this path. Many a time I was harsh to all of you in Practical Magic and my other classes. That especially applies to those Royal Knight hopefuls... Whether it was in or out of class, I am aware that I have been particularly strict to those students on a daily basis.”

The professor's ruthlessness hadn't only been unleashed on me. Nearly every time I saw her, she had preached about the resolve needed to become the Guardian Knight, but apparently, she had also given a slightly milder edition of her treatment towards me to the Royal Knight hopefuls. The best example was in her Practical Magic classes, where I remembered her working a few select students to the bone.

Now that I think back on it, all the people she targeted were indeed students who often proclaimed that becoming a Royal Knight was their dream.

“All my actions were my way of doing what I could for your futures. Though the empire has declared peace, nobody knows what the future holds for us. You are mages, and no matter your status, you all have a special power. I believe that you should always act with that fact in mind and be ready for anything.”

I sat quietly, waiting for her to go on.

“In particular, joining the Order is a life-changing decision. For all of you who share this aspiration, I would personally recommend that you once again ask yourselves whether you truly have what it takes to pledge your loyalty to the crown. And on that note, I shall end my final class. Though our time together has been brief, I would like to thank you all for putting up with me as your teacher.”

People who can end things with a cool and moving speech are so unfair. A great speech can change your impression of them completely, like all of their misdeeds have been undone.

When I confess to Charlotte, I should speak in a cool, dashing way, just like the professor did. Hm, should I start thinking about what I'll say now? I'm not that

good with words, after all.

With all that out of the way, Professor Yugiri's final lecture was over, and we were free.

"Oink...?" I blinked several times because right at that moment, something astonishing happened. After class ended, many loud footsteps sounded out at once, and a crowd of students started rushing over to the professor.

The people rushing her weren't just the members of the professor's private sessions. There were Royal Knight hopefuls forced to endure her intensive training in Practical Magic and even commoners, and they all had tears in the corners of their eyes as they lamented the professor's departure while expressing their gratitude. In fact, even Valjean was among them. *Y-You too? You were one of the students that Professor Yugiri was especially strict to though!*

Huh? Is this for real? Am I the only one who didn't like the professor that much? W-Wait, was the professor surprisingly well-liked by everyone?

I breathed in and out steadily. *Some people tend to be stubborn about their opinion despite the evidence and end up biased to a fault, thinking that only their own thoughts matter. Basically, those people believe that because they think one way, everyone must be the same.*

Well... Yeah, I'm talking about my impressions of the professor compared to everyone else's.

I half-heartedly jogged with my back slightly hunched over, thinking about Professor Yugiri on my way back from class. *It's not that I like her a lot or anything. If anything, she still isn't my favorite person. She isn't, and at the same time, I never thought that so many students would be reluctant to see her leave. I used to think that everyone was like me and that they would be relieved over her resignation.*

"Maybe there's a side of her that I don't know much about..." I muttered. For example, she could have turned out to be surprisingly caring outside of class, or maybe she was generous about treating people to meals.

That's right, Tina mentioned that the professor went over to visit her while she was hospitalized in the infirmary, didn't she? If I was in Tina's shoes and the professor came to see me, I'd probably be troubled, not knowing what to say... Maybe she's surprisingly talkative or something?

I heaved as I continued jogging. But I'm busy too, you know! I can't bring myself to make the effort to ask people about the secret side of Professor Yugiri.

But, hmm... If I became the Guardian Knight, she'd be my colleague. I would be a member of the Order after all. I would end up working in the place that changed the very foundation of her personality from that gentle and kind girl to what it is now...

Maybe it would be better if I talked to the professor and asked her about what the daily life of a Royal Knight is like, and what she likes about her life there. Ah, but she might be suspicious, wondering why I suddenly changed my tune and asked her such a thing. She'd probably accuse me of coveting Princess Carina or something... I wouldn't be surprised because I heard that she treats the princess like her own little sister.

"Oink... Oink..." I huffed as I jogged along. Ugh, losing weight is torture.

Ever since the night I spoke with Tina, I had started taking things seriously, but I was still having issues slimming down. It was soon going to be the height of summer. Just a bit of exercise was enough to make me sweat buckets and feel like my throat was drying up. I was putting so much strain on my body that I thought I'd shrivel up like a weed, and yet...

I snorted dejectedly. It's so strange. I remember being able to thin down much more easily last time. Maybe it really was the weight-loss potion working wonders... Hmm... I wonder how much it costs. If I can afford it, I guess I could buy it. Ah, but no! Bad Slowe! I just announced proudly to Charlotte that I'd lose weight based on my own merits without relying on something like that. Telling her that I've changed my mind after all that would be the embarrassment of the century!

"Hey..." I heard a girl's voice. "When should I tell my parents about our relationship?"

A boy laughed heartily. "It's still too soon, Christina."

The pair that had successfully confessed and had become a cute couple were holding hands and off in their own little world. However, I wasn't very bothered by it now. Up until a while ago, I had been the strictest student at Kirsch about discipline and this would have made me jealous, but I was a different man this time. My heart was calm, and I didn't feel like I needed to react. After all, I had decided that I would slim down and confess to Charlotte.

I nodded to myself, snorting as I wondered what Charlotte was doing right now. *She seems to have been busy lately with her jobs, so I hope she'll get some rest during the festival next week. Heh heh, Charlotte was sooo cute last time. When I told her that I was going to work on my body, she was over the moon!*

"Oink, oink!" I muttered happily. *I can't just keep brooding over the Guardian Knight stuff forever. I need to start walking forward again. I was utterly pathetic just a short while ago. Confessing my feelings to Charlotte while looking like this would feel cheap in my eyes.*

I overheard other students chatting as I continued jogging.

"I wonder why the empire pulled back their soldiers though."

"Maybe there's an internal revolt?"

"The empire has swallowed up and crushed many countries beneath their feet so far, so the north is full of rebellious factions, right?"

"Haven't you had enough of talking about the empire? Let's enjoy our lives instead!"

The sky was a clear azure blue, and the warm sunlight splashed a gentle hue over the campus.

Preparations for the festival were underway at a speedy pace, and I had heard that there was a speed-eating contest being planned again.

It feels so strange though. Everyone is smiling right there within an arm's reach, but it feels as if there is a barrier between me and them. It's as if my classmates are in a different world. Is that perhaps because I know about the future because of the anime? Hey, did you guys know that the world is currently peaceful all thanks to my hard work?

I heard a squeal and a girl came up to me. “It’s you, Lord Denning! Please shake my hand!”

“Huh? Huuuh? M-Me?”

“Thank you so much for back then! I boasted about you so many times. Nobody should have expected anything less than amazing from a Denning!”

A truly capable man doesn’t waste his breath speaking too much. Professor Yugiri wasn’t a woman of many words and became a popular professor before I even realized it, so I need to learn from her example.

“Ah! Master Slowe! So this is where you were!”

“Oink?” I turned towards the source of the voice. It was Charlotte.

“I decided to ask for some time off during the festival next week. After talking to you, I thought about it, and I really have been working a little too much lately. That’s why I think I’ll take it easy for a while.”

“Charlotte...!” I was deeply moved. *She’s been constantly working like there’s no tomorrow to earn money. Now she’s gone and declared that she’s not going to help out with chores at all during the festival, even though it’d be a prime time to earn a fortune!*

“Oh! A-And on that topic, Master Slowe, if you’re free, would you like to accompany me to—”

“Charlotte, I’m so glad to hear that! You don’t have to push yourself so hard! You managed to come back to Kirsch, so I want you to have fun during the festival. Plus, it isn’t just this school holding a festival; every city in Daryth is partying, so you shouldn’t miss out on the fun! The headmaster specially permitted this event as an exception, and we’ll probably never get a chance like this on campus again. Even looking back on the long history of this school, you’d struggle to find another example!”

“Y-Yes, yeah, you’re right. I will try having fun as well, just like you said.”

I nodded. “Exactly. That’s for the best.”

“But there is one thing that has been on my mind for a while though, Master Slowe... Why did the empire choose to withdraw their troops now of all times,

after everything they have done? Um, I know it might involve confidential information that I shouldn't be privy to, but I couldn't help myself..."

Charlotte probably wasn't the only one curious about that. *A few brave souls among my classmates have asked me directly too. They said that since I'm a member of House Denning, I might know about what's going on at the front lines and with the empire.*

"Nanatrij probably changed her mind or something," I guessed.

Charlotte looked puzzled. "Changed her mind...?"

To be honest, I also don't know the exact reason why the empire did that. However, I'm sure about one thing: the moment Rooney suffered defeat was the trigger that caused things to turn in favor of peace instead. The nail in the coffin for the war was the musketeer Dreibach's defeat in Zenelaus. She probably thought that the losses would be too great if she waged a war against the south or something like that.

"Charlotte, a common misconception in Daryth is that the queen makes the big decisions for this country, but in truth, she prizes the input of Lectrikuhl, the Great Spirit of Light whom she defers to, above all else. Meanwhile, the Dustour Empire is even more straightforward. Over there, they also have a royal ruling class, but their monarch is nothing more than a puppet. It's pretty well-known that Nanatrij directly operates the government there."

Charlotte nodded repeatedly, making noises of acknowledgment. *Hmm, how do I explain this in a way that's easy for Charlotte to understand with what she knows?*

"Bardot, a man who's both a musketeer and an important general in Dustour's military, is also said to be a fanatical servant of Nanatrij on top of that. In the end...every movement on the empire's part is directly connected to Nanatrij."

Charlotte paused for a moment of thought. "I wonder what kind of person Lady Nanatrij is."

Huh, so that's what grabbed Charlotte's attention. As for her question, well...it's a difficult one. After all, that Great Spirit scarcely puts herself out in

the open. How do I answer her?

I was torn about how to reply, but there was a helping hand from an unexpected source. “‘Dreadful’ is the only word that can be used to describe that one. You must never get involved with her, meow.”

My eyes widened. “Great Spirit! Well now, it’s pretty unusual for you to join in conversations about such topics.”

Whenever Charlotte or I tried to fish out a bit of wisdom from them, the spirit would stubbornly maintain their silence. This Great Spirit of Wind only ever told us the bare minimum. *With how long they’ve lived, they’re practically a living fossil. Surely it wouldn’t hurt for them to share some funny episodes from their past here and there, but oh well. They’re so stingy.*

Yet the spirit had oddly chosen to speak on this matter. I immediately figured out why. “Is whatever you’re eating delicious?”

“Yum, meow.”

The Great Spirit of Wind always disguised themselves as a black cat. *If someone witnessed them speaking in this form, it would be catastrophic. Thankfully, Charlotte reacted quickly and is holding them in her arms now, so it probably looks as if only she and I are talking.*

I stared at the cat. “It doesn’t seem very appetizing to me though.” *That thing in its mouth... What is that? A rat’s foot?*

Charlotte let out a small shriek.

The Great Spirit craved entertainment and often went into the forest and enjoyed hunting. They clearly went on one such trip just before this. But even I had never seen a rat like the one in the cat’s mouth: one with three hind legs. They must have been on cloud nine because they were *purring*. *Oh my*. I raised an eyebrow.

“H-Honorable Great Spirit!” Charlotte perked up. “Is Master Slowe right? Did the empire do such a thing under the instruction of this Lady Nanatrij you two mentioned?”

Charlotte usually scolded the spirit for being unhygienic whenever they

brought back hunting trophies from the forest, but it seemed that indulging her curiosity was her priority right now.

“Of course, meow.”

“What does she look like?” Charlotte asked.

“She takes on the form of a harmless human girl, but if you meet her in person, even you would immediately realize who she is with one glance, meow.”

“With one glance...? What do you mean?”

“‘This isn’t a human. I mustn’t anger her. I must stay as far away as possible.’ Apparently, that is what normal people immediately think when they see Nanatrij in the flesh. You could also just ask for her name. She isn’t fond of lying, so she’d answer you immediately, meow.”

The spirit gave out piece after piece of information freely, even though these tidbits were things they’d never tell me even if I had been the one asking. *This guy’s in a reeeally good mood today, aren’t they? For the Great Spirits, information about the others is meant to be a secret. Oh wait, that’s not exactly the case. They just don’t concern themselves with each other and make sure to not invade each other’s territories.*

“Sure enough, just talking about that spirit makes me annoyed. I’m hungry, meow.”

Charlotte gasped. “I’ll go grab something to eat!”

“I would like some fresh mice, meow.”

“Roger that! I shall be swift.”

Charlotte ran off with a whoosh, perhaps because she wanted to fish out even more information from the spirit. *But they wanted fresh mice! I wonder where in the world Charlotte was planning on finding those.*

“Slowe, there was something I wanted to say to you in private, meow.”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yes, you. That’s why I don’t need Charlotte here, meow.”

Huh, who would have expected that?

Though I felt apologetic to Charlotte, I snuck away with the Great Spirit. It seemed that the cat had something they wanted to tell me in secret, so we marched around the campus, looking for a place as isolated as possible.

However, I found my thoughts wandering to the spirit walking in front of me. *Sure, they look adorable and charming, but don't be fooled by their appearance... They are actually an ultimate weapon who would go to hell and back for Charlotte's sake.*

"I think this place would suffice. So what is it, Great Spirit? You hardly ever take the initiative to start a conversation with me. Are you going to shove some new, unreasonable tasks on me again, just like during my blackhearted Piggy Duke days?"

"Slowe. You met Nanatrij in Zenelaus."

I frowned. "Hey. How did you know that?"

I had been taking extra precautions so that they wouldn't find out, and I had done that to refrain from burdening Charlotte and this spirit with unnecessary weight. After all, I had decided that I would deal with the upcoming war alone, armed with my knowledge from the anime. Plus, if I had told this spirit that I had an encounter with Nanatrij, I didn't know what this guy would do.

"Be careful, meow."

"Be careful? Of what?"

"That one is very fond of talented mages, meow."

"I mean, I have heard that about her. She gives skilled mages an invitation to join her, and to those mages, being recruited by Nanatrij is a golden opportunity that would bring them fame and honor. But I'm a member of House Denning. There's no way Nanatrij would try recruiting *me* of all people."

"That may be so, but just in case, you should be wary, meow," the spirit said gravely.

Wait, is this guy worried about me? The same Great Spirit that had deemed me as beneath their attention all this time?

This feels a little strange, I've got to say. But the spirit's opinion has clearly changed. Especially after I changed from the blackhearted Piggy Duke into an earnest little piglet, they have stopped finding fault with everything I do. I've dragged Charlotte into many dangerous situations so far: Yoram, Huzak, Zenelaus... And yet, the Great Spirit hasn't commented on those at all. In fact, it feels as if they are somewhat approving of my actions.

"Slowe, don't get too carried away just because Dustour fell back. The people in this school are doing enough of that right now, meow."

"Does the school seem that way to you too, Great Spirit? It makes sense though. Everyone saw the signs of a coming war with the empire, but now we don't have to worry about it."

"Yes, but the factions within the empire aren't clear-cut and aren't necessarily in line with what she has decided. Nanatrij's will doesn't represent everyone. If things really were that straightforward, Huzak would still exist today, meow."

"That's..."

"When monsters attacked Huzak, there was no talk that the Dustour Empire would participate in the battle, meow."

I blinked. "What? Wait, what are you going on about? The empire has nothing to do with Huzak."

"They don't. Huzak was destroyed by monsters, or at least that's what the public thinks, and *that's* the problem, meow."

I had been a little doubtful about it from the beginning. No matter how I think about it, that war back then was odd. Huzak had been invaded by regular monsters, and even if there were many high-ranking ones among their forces, there was no way that the guardian of Huzak, the Great Spirit of Wind, would lose so easily. This guy is much, much stronger than me.

However, the Great Spirit wouldn't tell me anything about the goings-on back then despite the many times I had asked. They remained as stubborn as a mule and kept quiet about the whole thing. I had suspected that there was something they really didn't want to be reminded of.

And that's why my heart is racing a little right now. Finally, the spirit might tell

me about what went on during the fall of Huzak!

“There was one human among the monsters. There aren’t any records or any traces left of her being there, but one woman had definitely been there as well, meow.”

“A woman?”

“Talking about her, no, even remembering her makes me sick, meow.”

“But she was only one person, right? I honestly can’t even fathom you losing.”

“I also never had the thought that I would. But the monsters that woman was specifically controlling were extraordinary. She drew out more abilities from them than they should have had. Slowe, have you ever seen goblins that can fly in the sky, meow?”

“There’s no way. Goblins don’t fly.”

“Indeed, everyone knows that. However, the goblins brainwashed by her were under the impression that they could, and they actually *did* fly in front of me, meow.”

What the heck? Goblins flying in my direction? That’s terrifying. Ah, the spirit’s tail is thumping against the ground again and again. It’s easy to see that they’re rather upset.

“That was the first time I was ever fearful of a human. I even have nightmares of her now, meow.”

“Who in the world *is* she?”

“They call her the Dream Dealer Witch, or the Healing Doctor, meow.”

I couldn’t suppress my surprise and I gasped. If possible, I wanted to pretend I didn’t know that name. That bit of information was the last thing I wanted to hear, and she was the last person I wanted to meet in this world.

“The empire as a whole wasn’t involved in that battle. In other words, that means that Nanatrij hadn’t been a part of it, meow.”

I stared at the spirit, my head still in a stupor.

“But there are also humans within the empire who don’t obey Nanatrij. That’s

what I mean when I say that the factions in the Dustour Empire aren't so clear-cut. Just thinking about that makes me angry. I'm going to go torture some orcs in the forest, meow."

There wasn't a single cloud in the sky as the sun shone its brilliance down on the campus. I had overslept, a first for me as of late, and I had been roused by a magnificent sound resounding throughout the whole campus. It was a flourish of trumpets announcing the start of the festival!

"Oink!" My snort slowly turned into a giggle.

I rubbed my drooping eyelids as I opened the curtains, and I was greeted with the sight of magical fireworks shooting up into the azure sky. To the surprise of nobody, excitement took over me, and my willingness to go back to sleep evaporated in an instant. It seemed that this festival, which they were calling the Festival of Peace, had started off with a glorious bang before I knew it!

The day the peace treaty had arrived marked the beginning of festival planning, and today those plans were coming to fruition.

I breathed in and out steadily as I exercised.

Just as a certain spirit had said, the entire school was going wild. Kirsch was open to the public during this event, and people of all types and all ages came to join in on the celebration. There were long lines in front of the stalls and tents, and there was even a band playing music with instruments unfamiliar to me.

As for me, in contrast to everyone else, I continued my exercise routine quietly by myself. I was in a deserted corner of the campus, far away from the crowded areas. I was so distant that I could barely hear the cheers of children and voices of parents, both novel things at Kirsch. It was here that I was tormenting my body to the fullest.

"Oink! Oioioink!"

One thing that I looked forward to the most was when Charlotte would come over occasionally and deliver food to me and then make some small talk with

me. She happily talked about the various performances and events that she saw with her friends during the festival. She mentioned how it had been a while since she spent a day without work, and she seemed to be enjoying herself.

At the same time, she had apparently been disconcerted at first because it *had* been such a long time since she had a whole day to herself. Her friends were bringing her around all over the place though. *She really has some great friends.*

I continued to huff and puff as I thought on. *Since the peace treaty was announced, I really feel that everyone has been full of smiles and energy. But the Great Spirit singled me out and told me to be more guarded in spite of that... What a mean spirit! There is no way I could lose myself to the festivities after they went ahead and said something like that. I can't help but suspect that the empire might actually be up to no good behind the scenes.*

That aside, that reminds me of that woman who, uh, left a strong impression on the Great Spirit in Huzak... The Dream Dealer Witch, also known as the Healing Doctor Francisca, and one of the Three Musketeers of Dustour.

"They *still* haven't quieted down? It's nighttime already," I muttered. I wondered when the day's shenanigans would finally end. "I must say though, I never thought that the notorious Dream Dealer Witch had been involved in the fall of Huzak..."

In the anime, she had been an adversary renowned as a woman obsessed with the Great Spirits. She was one of the craziest characters in the cast, and she had practically stalked Eldred.

She had started off as a water mage who gave out potions infused with healing magic to anyone who asked for them without reservation. The Great Spirit of Darkness had been intrigued by her brilliant talent, and the spirit had recruited the woman into her own faction. Then, Francisca officially became one of the musketeers.

On the topic of those three, most people think that they are all loyal to Nanatrij like Dreibach and General Bardot, but it's a little different with the Dream Dealer Witch. The witch isn't indebted to the spirit. It's more accurate to

say that she affiliates herself with the Three Musketeers and the empire because it's mutually beneficial.

“If I remember right, that witch was the founder of the Potion Dealer Association... Just how old *is* she?”

Due to the endless conflicts in the north, there were always countless citizens with injuries. However, one day, an organization calling itself the “Potion Dealer Association” suddenly appeared there and began to distribute healing elixirs to the masses. Normally, the average citizen could never get their hands on potions infused with healing magic. However, their potions were both effective and reasonably priced. As a result, this meant that the Potion Dealer Association was warmly welcomed by the folks there.

Thus, their founder, the witch Francisca, was beloved by the people of Dustour, and they began calling her the Dream Dealer Witch, the Healing Doctor. And Nanatrij had been the one to offer the witch a place among her comrades. By having a hero of the people join her faction, Nanatrij’s influence further widened, and the Dream Dealer Witch received the protection of the empire in return, allowing her to expand her own might as well.

“I really don’t want to meet the Dream Dealer Witch... Great Spirit of Wind, giving me that information was great and all, but please don’t let that turn into ominous foreshadowing or a jinx...”

I had been admiring the scenery outside from my room’s window for a while. In the darkness, I could see people squealing and having fun, and there were also commoner students exploring Kirsch at night with their families. The view had made my heart swell, and I could have watched on forever.

That had led to the somber thought that I never had a chance to have a bonding moment and go around the campus with my parents like they were...and during my bleak moment, something abruptly jumped up onto my shoulder.

“Hm? Whoa!”

It was something small, around the size of a fist. However, it was not light in the least. Scared silly, I fell right over.

“Waaah!” I yelped. “Huh? Oh... A-A golem.” In fact, it was a cute, mini golem that I could have sworn I had seen somewhere before.

Wait, I have seen it. This is Tina’s mini golem. This golem climbed all the way up this building’s exterior wall to my room and came in through the window. For a moment, I thought I was under attack!

“Oh? This golem has a piece of paper in its hand,” I noted.

I unfolded it and found...

I stood at the foot of the clock tower, the spot that had probably changed the most after Kirsch had been reconstructed.

I began haltingly, “Uh... Could you...repeat that...?”

Twelve walkways intersected here, and the magnificent clock tower, a safe haven for everyone at school, was located right at the center of them all. The person who had summoned me here had probably just taken a shower because a pleasant fragrance drifted from her hair.

The letter in the mini golem’s hands had been a message telling me to come here, but it offered no further details. The sender had been a mystery, but I had my suspicions and had been proven right when I had found this girl waiting for me here.

“It was Professor Yugiri,” Tina stated.

“Are you for real?”

“Very much so! Do you remember my friend, a commoner girl who suffered from trauma after the monster invasion? Someone gave her an incredibly expensive soothing potion, and that someone was Professor Yugiri.”

“Jaw-dropping” can’t even begin to describe my shock. Professor Yugiri handing out potions to help students? And to commoners, at that?

It took me a while before I could compose myself again. “I mean, I know they say not to judge a book by its cover, but...”

“You believe me, Lord Denning?”

“Of course I do. There’s no reason for you to lie about it anyway... But why tell me all of a sudden?”

“Well, Lord Denning, you dislike Professor Yugiri, don’t you?”

“Rather than ‘dislike,’ I think it’s more that we naturally don’t mix very well...”
After all, her method of teaching is insane, and she always stubbornly believes that she’s right. At least lately, I’ve been avoiding her as much as I can so we don’t come across each other at school.

“Professor Yugiri is going to return to the capital next week, remember? I wanted you two to make up before then, so...”

“Make up?” I paused. “Why?”

“A while ago, I attempted a dual-element spell in class and failed... I told you about how she visited me in the infirmary afterward, right? Ever since then, I’ve started talking on and off with her, and well... Sometime after that, she asked me to pass those potions on to people weighed down by emotional burdens.”

Huh, I see... The professor must be a pretty good judge of character to choose Tina as the mediator. Tina is no stranger among the commoners, so if she’s the one passing the potions on, those students would accept them without a second thought.

“Professor Yugiri also mentioned one thing to me... She said that she had many things left unfinished, but her biggest regret was that she never got to have a heart-to-heart talk with you, Lord Denning.”

“Huh? With...me?”

“Yes! Professor Yugiri seemed to care a lot about you, and um... It isn’t what everyone and you think...” Tina fumbled around with words, trying to find the right phrasing. “The professor...didn’t want you to become the Guardian Knight.”

“I guessed as much. It was pretty obvious.”

Especially considering how many times she said that I’m not cut out for being the Guardian Knight and how she mentioned her loathing for me.

“It’s not quite what you think, however. Her reasons aren’t that simple.

Observing her, I can't help but feel that she's trying to make you give it up for a much more important reason, and..."

"I see. And you're here right now, telling me about her secret and giving me a reason to talk to her, but is that really okay, Tina? I'm guessing that the professor had said to tell absolutely no one about the potions."

"She did, but I thought that this was the only thing that could change your impression of Professor Yugiri, so I..."

Even long after I had parted ways with Tina, I remained immersed in my thoughts about the professor. *Professor Yugiri, huh? I still can't believe that she's a mysterious benefactor, but if that's the case, the headmaster's curious statement would make sense too. He mentioned how one of his worries had been solved and the campus had become more peaceful lately, or something like that...*

Everyone has a part of them that's hidden from others. Previously, I hadn't had any good opinions of the professor, but now, from an unexpected source, I've learned about her kindness.

"Well, I suppose it isn't too terrible of an idea to bid her a quick farewell just before she's off."

Maybe, just maybe, I made a mistake in how I've interacted with her until now.

Even the next day, the early hours of the morning couldn't put a damper on the heat of the festival at all. Apparently, fireworks of an unprecedented scale would be launched into the sky tonight, so there were probably many people here to view those along with enjoying the daytime festivities.

Champagne corks flew overhead as I walked down the campus path. I could also see tables scattered all over the grounds, jam-packed with plates of various foods competing for room on the tabletops.

"I have to find Professor Yugiri among all of *this*? Oh boy, this is going to be tough..."

But wait, is the professor the type of person who would participate in a festival like this? Someone extremely extroverted like Professor Loco Moco would be at the center of attention, so it would probably be easy to narrow down their location...but, uh, I don't feel like that applies to Professor Yugiri. Guarding important personnel with a sullen expression pasted onto her face even during a party definitely seems more her style.

A voice interrupted my thoughts. "Hey there, little round student! You should try these!"

"Hm? Me? Well... It's not like I get the chance every day, so I guess I could buy some..." *Oops, no can do! I must resist!*

At festivals like this, I can't help but get caught up in the mood and buy everything without thinking. Going around on an eating tour is sublime...but I'm on a diet now!

The ambient chatter floated into my ears.

"This school is so pretty!" a girl gushed. "Daddy, I'm going to go here when I grow up!"

"Stop right there! Don't run! You'll get lost!"

"Hey, that's the Dragon Slayer..."

"That's the candidate for Guardian Knight!"

"I heard he's already locked in for the spot."

"Don't be deceived by his looks; he's the glorious Dragon Slayer!"

Like I thought, rumors about me have spread all over the country, huh? It feels a little awkward going around with all these eyes on me. Wait a hot second, I haven't been locked in yet! I have no plans on becoming that knight!

"There are so many people around during a festival... It's not a place I'd want to be in with how things are right now..." I muttered.

I left the path that was crowded with people. The jolly, celebratory atmosphere slowly faded into the distance and left me feeling a little lonely inside, but it was going to be noon soon, so I had to get out of there fast. If I had remained there, it would have only been a matter of time before I gave in to the

passionate temptation of food, so I supposed it was for the best.

“You! Come over here for a bit!!!” a voice snapped in my direction.

A sound like a strangled croak came out of my mouth as I felt pressure on my neck. Someone had pulled on my shirt’s collar from behind me with all their might.

What?! An enemy attack? Is it the empire?! Hey! My clothes! Stop pulling at them; they’ll stretch!

The perpetrator was insistent. “Oh, come on! *Come! Over! Here!* And why are you fat again?!”

I was dragged farther away from the crowds and into the shadows between two school buildings. *Okay, I’m sure anyone would agree that this is the start of a shakedown session. But...I do know one person who is this violent.*

“Alicia!” I yelped back. “When did you come back?!”

“Don’t scream out my name like that! And what, you’ve got a problem with me coming back or something, huh?!”

“Well, I mean... You’re supposed to be under house arrest in your country, aren’t you?!”

She’s a girl who marches to the beat of her own drum, and is rather temperamental to boot. Even if she wears the most modest outfit possible, she is as lovely as a blooming flower. People cannot help but be fascinated the moment they lay eyes on her. However, her pulling me into an alley is probably the best representation of her personality and how she goes about life.

She is Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista, the second princess of the major nation Cirquista, a flourishing tourist country and an ally of the Country of Knights. She’s the anime’s lead heroine who didn’t return to her homeland during Kirsch’s reconstruction and instead went off adventuring with Shuya.

From what I remember from the show, she should be confined to her house at this moment as punishment for her outlandish actions. Hmm, in that aspect, she’s almost parallel to me, isn’t she? After all, she has successfully escaped her prison, obviously.

“Oh, shut up! I can be wherever I want, whenever I want, and you don’t get a say in it!”

“Save it for later. I’m looking for someone right now, so I don’t have time to entertain you.”

“Hey wait, Piggy Slowe! It’s not like I have any business with you either!”

“Then could you let go of me already? You’re going to ruin my clothes!”

Alicia hesitated. “There’s one thing I’d like to ask you though. May I?”

“What’s with the sudden change of tune?” I got silence as a reply, and impatiently, I said, “Just say it already.”

“Are people saying that me and Shuya...you know... You know what I mean! Are there rumors about us at school?! Or something?!”

“Come again?” *She’s trembling all over in embarrassment. Wait, did she do all this just to ask about that?!*

Alicia squawked loudly, making a huge fuss. “It’s all *your* fault for saying something so bizarre in Zenelaus, Slowe! You mentioned how everyone at school was talking about Shuya and I eloping!”



Ah, that makes sense. Considering her personality, she'd never tolerate herself being the topic of scandalous rumors. Jeez... Even in the anime, it took ages before she ended up with Shuya...

"There's nothing to worry about. There's no such rumor going around at all. I was joking."

There was visible relief on her features. "I'm glad to hear that. If that had been true, I would have never been able to show myself at school again."

Like always, she defies all common sense. Hey, does that mean she really snuck all the way here just to investigate whether such a rumor was going around on campus? Seriously?

"You should hurry up and let Shuya see that you're alive and kicking. That guy was pretty depressed for a while, thinking that it was his fault you weren't able to come to school anymore."

"Really? That moron never changes. All right, I'll go see him, and then the headmaster. I'll try asking the headmaster whether he'd let me stay here and live in the dorms again."

I paused. "Does he know that you're here?"

"No way." Alicia sounded like she was about to roll her eyes. "But what use are adults if they can't help us out in times like this? More importantly, why have you gotten so round again?"

"Don't nag me. A lot happened."

"Oh really... From the look on your face though, you look like you should be fine."

Damn it! What's with her? She's speaking as if she has seen right through me already.

After that fiasco, I went around campus, and whenever I saw a familiar face, I asked whether or not they had seen Professor Yugiri. After talking to people, I was surprised to find out what she had been doing. During the festival, she had given a final drill lesson to Royal Knight hopefuls in the training field and had

also volunteered to take care of monsters in the forest.

I couldn't help but overhear people talking around me as I made my way across the school grounds.

"Apparently, the famous Deities' Amusement team is going to launch the fireworks!"

"They're that mercenary group founded by the renowned fire mage Dessau!"

"Let's watch it from inside the clock tower!"

"School building rooftop, here we go! We're going to get the best view!"

The evening glow settled in the sky as masses of people fought to secure seats in preparation for the main dish on the menu today: the fireworks show! The air was filled with loud cheering and booing as excited people chattered and argued in the crowd. *I guess it's inevitable that people will end up squabbling when there are so many of them around.*

"Denning! I've finally found you!" A certain hot-blooded guy with short red hair that matched the sunset rather well popped into view. "Why weren't you in that workout spot of yours?! You made me look all over for you!" For some reason, the ever-cheerful anime protagonist was sweating all over and out of breath.

"Shuya...?" I muttered.

I get him though. Trying to find a specific person among this giant cluster of people at Kirsch is like searching for a needle in a haystack! I've been looking for the professor since this morning, but I only just learned that she's in the forest.

"Ah, right!" I yelled. "Alicia was looking for y—"

"Denning! I was sleeping in my room all this time, and I was just rudely awakened! He said to tell you..." Shuya was rambling. "I don't really know what he was going on about, but...the crystal ball said that your retainer is in danger, in the forest!"

I had a lot of advantages compared to the other people in this world because of my anime knowledge. Because of this, there was one thing I knew for sure:

the fact that I must always take Shuya Newkern's words very seriously. This time, Eldred had even gone out of his way to use Shuya as a medium to contact me!

I snorted to myself in thought. *There must be a reason he did that. It can't be meaningless, I'm sure of it.*

When I saw Charlotte at the festival today, she had said that she was looking for the professor to thank her for everything up until now. She'd mentioned that being the professor's assistant had been demanding work, but she had also found the job to be very worthwhile.

From what I heard from investigating today, the professor went off into the forest around sunset. She had announced that her final job was to get rid of as many monsters as possible to prevent them from approaching Kirsch. Allegedly, up until now, she has been periodically heading out into the forest and pruning the monster population there.

What's with all that? I thought to myself, frustrated. *Tina had said that she has been giving out potions to commoner girls and that she was deliberately paying Charlotte a higher wage because my retainer needed money... Ugh! How am I supposed to react to all that?! Yeah, I guess that my impression of the professor is different from everyone else's.*

"Where are you, Altanger?!" I yelled.

Charlotte had gone looking for the professor in the forest. Of course Altanger, the Great Spirit of Wind, must be with her. *Normally, I wouldn't have anything to worry about with them around, so why did Eldred warn me? After the battle at Zenelaus, I threatened him that I wouldn't let him off easily if he tried contacting Shuya or me again. I thought that he'd be quiet for a while, but now...*

Now within the bounds of the forest, I spotted monster corpses scattered everywhere. *Whoa, that's a lot of killing. However, this is also proof that many monsters have gotten close to the campus...*

"No way. You've got to be kidding me!"

I shuddered. I came across an area with a distinct lack of trees, despite being

deep in the forest. It was almost as if it had taken a direct hit from a hurricane and the trees had all been uprooted from the sheer impact. Without a canopy of leaves overhead, starlight filtered through that hole alone.

“Altanger!!!” I screamed.

Even more shocking to me was the sight of the battered Great Spirit of Wind in the center of it all. This area was clearly the aftermath of a fierce battle. I couldn’t believe it; the strongest bodyguard had been knocked out. *This guy is a Great Spirit and on the same level as Eldred, who overthrew Dreibach Steibelt! How could they be wounded to such an extent?!*

Even as I tried shaking them, they didn’t seem to regain awareness at all. “Altanger!”

It was a disastrous scene, and it looked as if a titanic, monstrous beast had razed the area. It was clear that the Great Spirit had used their real abilities. *Even during the attack of the black dragon, or in Zenelaus, this guy had remained obstinate and refused to use their power. Compared to Eldred or Nanatrij who fire off their powers at will to fulfill their desires, Altanger is quite conservative. There is only one situation where they’d unleash their power, and that is...to protect Charlotte.*

“Altanger, I’ll cut to the chase! Who the hell tried to make a move against Charlotte?!”

This guy had wielded their power to protect her...and lost.

Interlude: The Dream Dealer Witch

“At last, this moment has arrived... Master Slowe has made up his mind and has decided to become the Guardian Knight!”

Charlotte had rejoiced from the bottom of her heart. Repeatedly, she thought back to the words Slowe had said to her a few days ago and what they implied. In fact, she had been so worked up about it that she hadn't been able to fall asleep for the past few days as those words flashed in her mind.

“Madam Mallow, I did it!”

On the day Charlotte had departed for Kirsch, she had done so shouldering the expectations of everyone in House Denning: to guide Slowe onto the path of Guardian Knight.

“After I slim down through my own efforts, there’s something I want to tell you.”

Slowe's words had come out of a brave, once-in-a-lifetime determination, but Charlotte had interpreted his words in a way that was quite contrary to his intentions. She had thought that he meant he would lose weight and become the Guardian Knight.

“I wonder why Master Slowe suddenly had a change of heart though... He had been very unenthusiastic for the longest time. I also heard that he told the queen he needed time to think it over, so...”

Nobody could fault Charlotte for making such a mistaken assumption, however. Ask any other male student at Kirsch, and they would have immediately nodded in acceptance if the queen offered them the position of Guardian Knight. After returning to campus, Charlotte had observed such a reaction from the boys nearly everywhere she went.

“Not everyone in House Denning has acknowledged Master Slowe... That's why the best path for him would be knighthood...” Charlotte mumbled.

Even after assessing the situation, Charlotte still had thought that the best possible future for Slowe was none other than becoming Princess Carina's knight.



"Freshly grilled cryptid fish from Cirquista! We offer all kinds of local specialties here, whether it be from the south or the north!"

Kirsch Mage Institute was bustling with visitors during the festival that would last three days and three nights. With a little skip in her step, Charlotte was preoccupied with looking for a certain person somewhere in the crowds. The person in question was the much talked about Professor Yugiri, the honorable Royal Knight who had been dispatched to Kirsch to replace Professor Loco Moco and would soon leave this school.

Charlotte had wanted to thank Professor Yugiri for everything she had done. She turned her head around restlessly as she walked around the campus filled with sightseers to try to spot a glimpse of her.

It had been a sheer coincidence that Charlotte had ended up meeting the obstinate and determined Professor Yugiri in the first place. Charlotte had been fretting about finding a way to somehow make enough money to buy a weight-loss potion to help spur on Slowe's reform. The retainer had heard a rumor about a well-paying job: a new professor had been seeking an assistant.

The professor had hired a number of commoners, but none had lasted very long before they were fired. Rumors started going around that being the professor's assistant was practically a matter of life and death. However, to Charlotte, this job hadn't been rough.

"Ah, Miss Charlotte! Are you by yourself?" a girl chimed.

Charlotte paused, looking at the speaker. "Tina? What are you doing over there? Looks like business is booming."

"It's a magic class! You see, it's not just nobles visiting the school like usual; there are a lot of commoners too. Seeing other commoners use magic makes their faces light up like the sun. Some even yelled that we're the stars of their

hopes and dreams...and tip very generously!”

Charlotte had gone to the professor’s private quarters, and there, she had been tasked with one job: to support the professor, who had wanted to find promising students but had been a little stuck. In other words, Charlotte’s job was to investigate the behaviors of noble students. Luckily, this specific department was Charlotte’s specialty. After all, she *had* secretly watched over the infamous Slowe every single day for a year.

“Ah, that reminds me. Miss Charlotte, I think I saw Lady Alicia just now.”

“Lady Alicia is in Cirquista right now. There’s no way she’s around, Tina.”

“I know that, but... Huh, maybe I made a mistake... Oh, and if you’re looking for Professor Yugiri, she was near the main gate. She seemed to be going off to find someone.”

Professor Yugiri had two conditions for accepting students into her private sessions. One of them was being gifted in water magic, and the other was being of good character, based on Charlotte’s intel. Charlotte had once asked what the professor did in her classes, and she had explained that she taught students how to brew potions infused with healing magic in order to raise outstanding water mages.

After Charlotte had found that out, she eagerly requested that the professor brew a weight-loss potion for her master. As a result of that, Charlotte had been given an earful in public as the professor scathingly said that a future knight relying on a potion was completely out of the question. Slowe had interrupted them and the professor’s anger diverted to him instead, allowing Charlotte to escape. Charlotte had known that the two were said to be like oil and water, and she had finally seen it for herself during the incident.

That had led to one little problem: Charlotte’s job had been the investigation of noble students, and if the worrywart Slowe found out, he might force her to quit despite it having a good pay that was rarely seen. In the end, Charlotte had continued to be her assistant in secret.

But now, Professor Yugiri was finally going to leave Kirsch. Charlotte wanted to bid a last farewell to the professor since she had received a grand sum of

money as an assistant, which had included a sizable bonus in exchange for her silence about the job.

“Oh, Professor Yugiri!” Charlotte perked up. “Um, there’s something I would like to talk about...”

“It’s you, Charlotte... What good timing; I have business with you as well. Could you spare me a moment of your time?”



The dense forest outside Kirsch was crammed with verdant trees. The memory of monsters pouring from its depths was still fresh in Charlotte’s mind. If possible, she knew she’d like to stay as far from this green world as she could.

Normal students were prohibited from entering this area unless they were brought there with a class. While Charlotte had heard about how the Daryth army had cleared out monsters from the forest during Kirsch’s reconstruction, that didn’t make the incident fade from her mind at all.

“Professor Yugiri, I don’t really want to go too far into the forest...”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to bear with it a little longer. There’s someone I want you to meet who is a bit farther inside.”

“Someone you want me to meet?”

“They are a person with the capabilities of making the potion you seek. I remember that you were rather insistent about how you needed a weight-loss potion. Am I not mistaken?”

“Oh... Actually, I don’t need it anymore. Master Slowe has made up his mind that he would lose weight through his own efforts.”

Yugiri paused. “That is surprising to hear... I haven’t seen that youth lately, but I see. It’s good that he has made such a decision, but he would likely still require that potion. There is the chance that he might put on weight again in the future. You should hold on to one in preparation for such a possibility.”

“Ah... You’re right.”

Slowe might not seem like it, but he was rather fickle. It wouldn’t be too surprising if he suddenly lost all motivation to slim down again sometime. Thus,

Charlotte decided to accept the professor's goodwill without another thought.

Still, how far is she planning on bringing me? Charlotte thought worriedly. The farther she went into the forest, the darker and more perilous it became. Occasionally, she could even hear the unfamiliar howls of beasts, distinctly different from the small birds and animals she was familiar with. At this point, she couldn't really call it a forest. Saying it was a jungle would be more accurate.

Professor Yugiri mentioned that someone wants to see me, but why does it have to be out here? Even if she was with a Royal Knight, Charlotte still felt vulnerable. Her eyes darted all over the place uneasily before settling her gaze on the back of the professor, who was leading the way.

"Um, Professor," Charlotte began slowly. "Aren't we prohibited from going too deep into the forest?"

"You're with me, so there isn't an issue. Or are you implying that I cannot be trusted?"

"No, not at all, but..."

"The person I wish to introduce you to has rather...unique circumstances. However, water mages of her talent are few and far between. She can probably brew the perfect weight-loss potion for your master. I have never seen a healer more skilled than her in all my life."

Charlotte's eyes widened. "I heard that you are also terrific at water magic, Professor."

"I could never compare with her. After all, the elixirs she made were even able to soothe the fears in people's hearts."

Even though Charlotte was afraid the person waiting for her deep in the forest might be someone of dubious origins, her curiosity got the better of her. To add to that, even if she encountered monsters there, she had the dependable professor in front of her, and above all else, the Great Spirit was with her too. On the way here, Charlotte had made sure to diligently check whether she could sense the spirit every so often, as the cat had been following

her closely.

“Charlotte, I am very thankful to you. There are many students here who proclaim that they want to become a Royal Knight, but once you look a little closer, most of them do not have the necessary resolve. It was all thanks to you that I was able to tell who actually imposed difficult challenges upon themselves and had the right aptitude to be a knight.”

Charlotte was flustered. “Oh, I didn’t do anything, really...”

“You did. All the other commoners were extremely against the idea of tailing nobles like I had asked. I can understand where they are coming from though... That makes me curious, Charlotte; where did you learn such a skill?”

“Welllll... You see, I used to monitor Master Slowe’s everyday activities, and along the way...”

“Hah, so that’s how it is,” Yugiri laughed. “It seems that even House Denning hadn’t fully abandoned all hope in the Fallen Prodigy of Wind. That mystifies me, considering how in the end, House Denning made the coldhearted decision to discard him.”

In Charlotte’s eyes, Yugiri was a very mysterious professor. Slowe hadn’t liked her one bit, but the students in her private sessions had all adored her. Slowe seemed to have difficulties with the woman, but Charlotte didn’t really share the same opinion.

“Professor, what do you mean by that?”

“Ah, pardon my rudeness, I’m not trying to reproach the ways of House Denning. I just felt that it was a heartbreaking thing, you see. I wonder what he thought when his family told him to become the Guardian Knight without regard for his feelings. Hm? Charlotte, does this not ring any bells to you? Were you also blinded by the honor bestowed upon your master, oblivious to the tragic future waiting for him? That is the consequence of becoming the Guardian Knight. Didn’t you know that?”

Charlotte spoke slowly, not understanding the woman. “Professor Yugiri... What are you saying?”

“I believe I have been very clear. While I wish to enlighten you, seeing how

little you seem to know...it seems that she is already here, waiting for us.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened. “Huh...?”

“Wonderful job, Yugiri.”

Charlotte realized that someone was behind her as soon as she heard another woman’s voice. She was so shocked that she couldn’t even gasp. *Since when has she been there?* However, once Charlotte took notice of the woman, her eyes widened even further.

The woman was wearing foreign clothing that Charlotte had never seen before. She was dressed in a robe of sorts, which was made in such a way that it couldn’t fully conceal the woman’s feminine charms. What unnerved Charlotte the most, however, was how the woman seemed to have little presence and left only a vague impression despite how close they stood to each other.

The moment Charlotte laid her eyes on the woman, she felt as if she were trapped and was being dragged deep into a body of water.

Just a moment later, something jumped onto her head. The Great Spirit of Wind had taken a great leap out of nowhere.

“Charlotte! Run, meow!” the spirit hollered.

The Great Spirit, who had always taken on the lowly guise of a harmless pet and made sure to never speak in front of humans, was now growling openly. They bared their wariness against the woman, who had seemingly appeared out of thin air.

“G-Great Spirit! You promised Slowe that—”

“Who cares about that?! Charlotte, she is a threat, meow!”

Before Charlotte could even yell for them to stop, the Great Spirit of Wind unleashed a roaring gust of wind towards the woman with a force that could easily blast someone away. The gale ran wild. The bursting wind strengthened further and gouged large chunks out of the hard ground. It mowed down trees deeply rooted into the earth as if they were tender grass. The Great Spirit possessed a power that would be too devastating to ever be targeted at a human.

Charlotte was shocked, completely flabbergasted at how or why the spirit had suddenly turned its aggression on the woman. However, the gruesome result she imagined didn't come to pass.

"Why are you here, meow?!" the spirit hissed.

"My, it has been quite a long time since we last met, Great Spirit of Wind. I never thought I would meet you in a place like this. What an interesting twist of fate," the woman said leisurely.

"This little one is, um... They're a monster! Yes, a monster! That's why they can talk!" Charlotte babbled.

"Charlotte, this woman is one of the Three Musketeers of the Dustour Empire, meow!"

A person whom the spirit despised so much that they didn't even want to be reminded of her was *right there*. This woman had been among the midst of the monsters attacking Huzak all those years ago, and she had an unhealthy fixation on the Great Spirit of Wind. The spirit couldn't stop themselves from rushing out towards the woman. Against her, victory was only possible if they made the first move.

"Huh...?" Charlotte mumbled in a stupor.

The "Three Musketeers" didn't mean anything to Charlotte at first. The group's members were not household names to her because Slowe had guarded her from many truths in the world. She hadn't even known that a musketeer had appeared in Zenelaus.

From her perspective, the empire's musketeers were as incomprehensible as beings from a different world. Thus, she had ended up reprimanding the Great Spirit for wielding their power. A normal person would surely die from the brunt of it, after all.

However, the woman effortlessly dealt with Altanger's attack with one hand. "How cold of you, Great Spirit of Wind. Do you still not understand that you cannot win against me?"

"What in the world is this absurd mana?! And a Great Spirit, you say?! What's going on?!" Yugiri yelled.

“I am very thankful to you, Yugiri, for bringing this girl here. I didn’t expect that you would bring a Great Spirit as well, but...this one won’t hinder my plans at all,” the woman announced.

“The Great Spirit of Wind?! Wait, are you telling me that *that* being is Altanger?!”

“Charlotte, run! I’ll buy time for you, meow!” Altanger hissed.

Charlotte began to sprint as the spirit ordered, and—

“I will not allow her to escape. She’s my bait to lure him out, after all...” The woman trailed off before raising her voice. “Yugiri!”

—a firm hand belonging to the Royal Knight gripped the terrified retainer’s shoulder, stopping her.

The roaring winds were still going strong in the background as Charlotte’s mind was thrown into utter chaos.

However, Yugiri shared her shock. “What did my arm just do?! I didn’t...!”

In fact, the Royal Knight might have been the most startled one present. First, there had been a raging torrent of wind that threatened to send her onto her knees, and she had heard that its wielder was the Great Spirit of Wind. However, she then saw her friend the potion dealer stopping that wind head-on with a single hand.

Her confidant, easily fending off a Great Spirit’s power? What was going on? The woman’s actions were extraordinary. The potion dealer almost looked like...*something* more than human, a being only told in legends.

“Fran!” Yugiri shouted. “What have you done to my body?!”

Yugiri sifted through the vast amount of information swimming in her head and swiftly arrived at the only answer. The important thing right now was the identity of the potion dealer, and there was just one person who matched up with what was happening. People said that the witch of the Three Musketeers could brainwash enemies and control them at will. And Yugiri’s right arm, which was still gripping Charlotte’s frail shoulder and disobeying the orders of her mind, was the best evidence of it.

Up until now, from the shadows, Yugiri had exterminated many enemies after they had risen in revolt against the royal family. The Royal Knight had battle experience against tough enemies in spades. She had lost count of the number of betrayals she had suffered by the hands of those she once called comrades. Thus, she was able to realize the truth quickly: she herself had been used by the enemy.

Yugiri clenched her jaw. “Your identity... It’s exactly what that cat said, isn’t it?!”

“My dear Yugiri, have you only just realized who I am? There should have been many things to tip you off, but it seems that the warriors of the south truly do not know how to doubt people.”

Pathetic, Yugiri thought. To think that I was taken advantage of by the enemy... I am a failure of a Royal Knight.

Yugiri shifted her focus from her out-of-control right arm to her left, reaching for the sword at her hip. However, she was faced with a cruel reality: she couldn’t move. Her body almost seemed as if it belonged to someone else.

“It is useless. Your body is mine now. If you have realized who I am, Yugiri, you should know that resistance is futile.”

“Why? Your lot has sent a peace treaty to us at the Grant Wetlands, and—”

“The Dustour Empire has factions, so everything is a little trickier than ‘one person rules all.’ I may be counted as one of the musketeers, but you see, I am the single human who isn’t under Nanatrij’s command.”

As a Royal Knight, Yugiri was privy to every little detail about the events at the Grant Wetlands. She knew that an envoy had visited and that peace had been established.

The potion dealer continued. “Oh, Yugiri, all of you in the south are far too naive to the art of war. If a Royal Knight like you is this foolish, then what in the world does the Alliance Leader have to be so afraid of?”

Yugiri found herself stunned at how the woman had infiltrated enemy territory in such a bold manner. And now, with her body out of control, she couldn’t even rectify her blunder and regain her honor as a Royal Knight.

Yugiri hung her head. “My apologies, Charlotte; I never intended to involve you in something like this. I only wanted to help you procure a weight-loss potion for that youth—”

“Yugiri, you will be my first puppet inside the Country of Knights.”

The potion dealer smiled wide and knelt on the ground. Then, facing Yugiri, she began to pray. A pale blue haze engulfed Yugiri’s body.

Charlotte could only stare with her eyes wide at the sight, her body unable to move at all. This first encounter with the witch left a deep, profound impression on her that she would not soon forget.

“Charlotte! Don’t just stand around! Take this opportunity and run, meow!”

“But Great Spirit, Professor Yugiri is...!”

The Royal Knight’s movements ceased completely, besides her iron grip on Charlotte’s shoulder. The transition was ghostly silent, and she looked almost as if her soul had left her body behind as an empty shell. However, her hand didn’t become any less firm.

Charlotte couldn’t even let out as much as a whimper at the horrific scene that had played out before her, but there was one thing she knew for sure. The professor had been deceived.

The witch knelt with one hand held out to stop the Great Spirit’s spell, and she continued talking to the professor.

“I have always been excellent at a certain type of magic that allows me to break people. The Dream Dealer Witch, the Healing Doctor... Indeed, once, there was a time when I was called those names. But did you know, Yugiri, that the longer I interact with someone, the deeper I understand them? Oh, Yugiri...” The woman sighed. “Now that I have taken a peek inside you, I am even more intrigued. What admirable loyalty. Even after you’ve lost all reason, you still wish to dedicate your all to Daryth, do you...?”

The Royal Knight was frozen, and the woman was having a one-sided conversation with tears running down her cheeks. Without context, she almost looked like a priestess overflowing with compassion. However, if the Great Spirit was right, then the woman was someone whom Charlotte actually did

know a lot about.

She was called the Dream Dealer Witch—the woman who had turned Dustour soldiers into puppets without fear, the one emotion that constantly plagued soldiers on the battlefield.

“I see. At this rate, you will never win against him. I understand that much, Yugiri, but if that’s the case... I have released you from the chains that bind your heart. Or perhaps you could call it the restraints of humanity, one’s rationality. My Yugiri, live the life you wish to live and do whatever you wish. I shall teach you the true meaning behind your allocation to this school as a Royal Knight.”

Once upon a time, this woman had founded the Potion Dealer Association and attempted to provide salvation to the people suffering due to circumstances out of their control. Yet, this Dream Dealer Witch had sided with the Dustour Empire. When that knowledge had spread far and wide, everyone had been puzzled as to why such a thing happened.

She was also the woman who later went on to have a quarrel with General Bardot about the operation of the army, and she had destroyed an entire mountain from the landscape during that argument. There was another case where she had plucked fear away from Dustour’s soldiers and crushed surrounding nations with these lionhearted troops.

“Once I release someone from their shackles, they all end up thanking me. No, it is all right. I shall leave this important mission to you. You shall be the one to vanquish that youth, whom even the Alliance Leader is concerned about. You came to Kirsch Mage Institute to fulfill this duty of yours, even if it meant losing everything in the process, didn’t you? I completely understand you, so first...please escort this girl to *that* place. I shall deal with this eyesore posing as a Great Spirit. Now then, time to wake up, Yugiri.”



The empire was steadily withdrawing its troops, and the world was heading towards the path of peace. At Kirsch, a festival celebrating peace was planned for three days and three nights, and everyone was rejoicing.

Yet...why do I always end up like this, every time? Charlotte thought grimly. She then started wondering when she had started having such thoughts. The

young woman had always gotten the short end of the stick, whether it was during the black dragon incident, in Zenelaus, or even in Huzak.

“What do you have to be so afraid of, Charlotte? I’ve told you many times that I don’t plan on harming you, haven’t I?”

“O-Ow, it hurts!” Charlotte whimpered. Professor Yugiri had tightened her hold on Charlotte’s wrist as she pulled her along. The force was enough to make her bones let out grinding sounds in protest.

She’s treating me as if I’m not a person, but simply a thing she has to carry with her. The difference is like night and day, Charlotte thought. Her words and actions don’t match up. When she began moving again a short while after she was covered by the haze, her conduct was strange too.

At this point, the Professor Yugiri that was leading Charlotte almost seemed like a stranger. Right now, there was something mechanical and inhuman about the woman, and Charlotte couldn’t get a read on her at all.

“Who are you?! I’m not a good hostage; I’m worthless!”

“I am Yugiri, Charlotte. And worthless, you say?” Yugiri harrumphed, seemingly amused. “Are you blind to your value? It is clear as day that you are special to Slowe Denning.”

“Professor Yugiri... Why are you so obsessed with Master Slowe?”

“Do you remember the man known as Sepith Pendragon?”

“Wha—”

“I once thought that Sepith would be my biggest rival on the road to becoming the Guardian Knight. However, Sepith had the seeds of rebellion sown within him. I was negligent of it, but that youth noticed, and he successfully prevented the kidnapping of a Cirquistan princess. I wanted to know how he had realized such a thing was happening. There is more to the story, however. Not too long ago, I was granted the opportunity to visit Sepith in his cell. That man was *grateful* to that youth. Even though the youth...your master, was Sepith Pendragon’s bitter enemy who thwarted his dear wish of defecting to the empire...that man was still thankful.”

Sepith Pendragon had also been memorable to Charlotte. He had been a Royal Knight with treachery festering in his heart, despite his position.

“I wanted to know what kind of character this Slowe Denning was. I wanted to see whether this youth truly has what it takes to become the successor of the Moonlit Guardian Knight. Therefore, I must now make him undergo a trial that would determine his worth.”

“That’s... You have no right!”

“On his quest to look for you, he will probably discover the defeated Great Spirit of Wind. He would likely realize that a mighty enemy stronger than the Great Spirit was lying in wait for him. However, if he truly has the makings of a Guardian Knight, he must come to your rescue, even if it means putting his life in danger. In other words, you are currently playing the role of Princess Carina in a world where he has become her knight. Aren’t you honored?”

“Wh-Why are you doing this?! And the Great Spirit of Wind hasn’t lost!”

“I wonder about that,” Yugiri said slowly. “I cannot imagine the woman who gave me this power suffering defeat. Well now, we have arrived.”

After passing through disorderly rows of trees, the pair had reached an abrupt clearing where the moonlight was allowed through to dimly light up their surroundings. The scene that Charlotte found herself in front of was a crumbling ruin.

There were the husks of former buildings here, some collapsed, some leaning over, and others partially buried underground. Constructs that stood up tall and straight were the oddity instead. There were also plants growing here that she had never seen before, with imposing green leaves jutting out from their stems. She had a feeling that they were taking on a shape that normal plants should never have. The most terrifying thing, however, was that there was an utter absence of any other signs of life.

“No matter how many times I visit this place, it always makes me shudder,” Yugiri muttered. “People knowledgeable about Kirsch’s history call this place the Terminal... Well, I suppose we could have a little chat before that youth comes.”

Charlotte had heard whispers of this place. People said that there was an area in the forest that fanatical research staff had used, and tests of all types had been fair game. Likely due to some kind of experiment, this area had been transformed into barren land that stood in contrast to the lush greenery that surrounded it, perhaps as the consequence of a severe wildfire. It was said that experiments involving monsters or plants had been conducted here.

“I-I refuse! I have nothing to say to you in your current state!”

“Surely you can tell that you don’t have an option in this case? The being that protects you, that Great Spirit of Wind, won’t be coming. They have already lost.”

The Great Spirit, losing? How could that be real? And that witch said that she released the professor from all her mental constraints, Charlotte thought feverishly. Even if she looks the same, this is a stranger. Once, Master Slowe had mentioned that brainwashing magic and magic that could warp the mind and heart were more than extremely arduous. That level of magic is like causing a miracle to happen. A mage of this caliber...might even be able to defeat the Great Spirit of Wind...

“Even so, I still don’t intend to talk to you right now, Professor!”

“No, you ought to know this. You ought to know what that youth will lose and gain when he becomes the knight. As Slowe Denning’s retainer, it is your duty to shoulder his pain with him.”

“P-Pain? What are you...?”

Yugiri furrowed her brows. “I can’t believe I am asking you this, but have you not given any thought to the consequences? Even someone like me has asked him countless times whether he has the resolve to become the Guardian Knight, but look at you. You’re blind to the solitude ahead of him, despite being his retainer... I see; that must mean House Denning is indeed ill-informed about how things operate in the royal court. Well, I have the opportunity, so I shall teach you about it now.”

“What are you trying to say?” Charlotte gritted her teeth.

“The title of Guardian Knight belongs to the person fated to be the most

solitary being in this country. The moment Slowe Denning ascends to that position, he will no longer belong to House Denning.”

“I know that much...”

“No, you don’t understand anything. Take the current Guardian Knight, Sir Delfrey. I hear that once, there was someone whom he vowed to spend the rest of his life with. She was a princess of a minor country, and they were deeply infatuated with each other. However, that future never came to pass, and they parted ways. It was inevitable. A Guardian Knight marrying a foreign woman, no, even having a family has never happened before. That is why I have tirelessly asked him time and time again about it. The Guardian Knight devotes their entire being to the future queen... Does he truly have the resolve to do that?”

Charlotte was speechless.

“As a Royal Knight myself, I know the extent of the continuous agony which torments the holder of that title. The path waiting for Slowe Denning is a one-way road to hell. You should also brace yourself because on the day he accepts the knighthood, all of the days gone by with him will vanish as well. You’ll never even have the chance to speak with him again. There is too much of a difference in status between you two for you to be together, even now. But in the future, he would become the supreme Guardian Knight while you remained a mere commoner. What right would you have to take up his time then?”

Yugiri’s words sank deep into Charlotte’s heart like a hard, heavy stone. The former princess of the destroyed country was already dead, so she was no more than a commoner now. And she would stay that way for the rest of her life.

Yugiri continued, “If you truly wish for your master’s happiness... If being with him in the present brings you even a smidgen of joy and comfort, you should have stopped him.”

Seeing there was only silence on Charlotte’s end, Yugiri added, “I must say though, he is a pitiful one, seeing that the person who is meant to understand him better than anyone else is like this right now. You are probably the same as those in House Denning who threw him to the wolves. No matter what kind of sweet pleasantries they decorate it with, the reality is that House Denning has,

well...”

After all this time, Charlotte had finally realized what she had done. She had been so thoughtless, so foolish to say over and over that Slowe should become the Guardian Knight. She hadn't grasped the weight sitting on Slowe's shoulders. And even worse, despite being the person closest to him, she...

“There has been no precedent of this, no matter how far we look back in history. A person who isn't a Royal Knight and hasn't even undergone the Guardian Knight Selection being chosen as the Guardian Knight is preposterous. However, Her Majesty was convinced that he was the right candidate. That was why I tried to investigate Slowe Denning's character, and when I first met him...I was disappointed. After all, he had been clearly against the idea.”

Disregarding Charlotte's silence, the woman twisted the knife even further. “Every time I made a speech about the obligations of a Royal Knight in class, his mood turned sour and he stared out the window. I had been furious, thinking he was that uninterested in what I had to say, but thinking back on it...he had probably been aggravated by his environment.”

The Guardian Knight was a person that everyone at Kirsch idolized. *But Master Slowe didn't seem enthusiastic about it. There are so many signs that were pointing to such a conclusion.*

“Charlotte, this is what I think, but...”

Just like Professor Yugiri said, whenever he saw students hyped about the Guardian Knight, he always had this cold look in his eyes. And just like everyone, Charlotte had forced her own admiration on Slowe.

“I tried to warn him about the grim, solitary nature of the Guardian Knight, but I think that he had long realized it himself.”

Charlotte no longer had it in herself to try to make any rebuttal.

“And suddenly, after a certain day, he seems to have made up his mind and moved on from his frustrations. At the very least, I am certain that he has begun to evaluate the option seriously.”

Charlotte jumped with a start before freezing again.

"I am rather curious about the identity of the person who changed his heart despite how adamant he had been...but it is all in the past." Yugiri shrugged.

"Uh, well... Just asking, Charlotte, but do you kind of share the same opinion as everyone in House Denning and at Kirsch...? By any chance, do you agree that I should become the Guardian Knight?"

"Do you even have to ask? Master Slowe, nobody is more fitting for the noble Guardian Knight than you!"

Charlotte had a sinking feeling that she knew exactly when that "certain day" was.

Despite having feats such as the slaying of a dragon under his belt, Slowe had hated the idea of becoming the Guardian Knight. *But then I said to him...* Charlotte thought, *I said that I was overjoyed at the fact that even the queen noticed how amazing Master Slowe was.*

That day, the Dragon Slayer's retainer had encouraged him with nonchalant, thoughtless words. *I had only seen the glorious title of Guardian Knight, and I didn't think at all about how Master Slowe felt.* Charlotte paled. "What have I..."

"If that youth has made up his mind to walk the solitary path of the Guardian Knight, just as his predecessor did to serve the royal family, I am duty bound to test his resolve."

And now, listening to the words spoken by the professor turned enemy, Charlotte finally realized the implications of the title.

Charlotte's life with Slowe Denning began the day he had saved her, and he had always been by her side. She had taken it all for granted, assuming that such a life where the person she liked would accompany her at all times would go on forever and ever. These precious, ordinary days were almost too privileged to be real.

But now, *he* was going to leave it all behind to embark on a journey to a place where she couldn't follow.

"Well now... I see. He has arrived," Yugiri muttered.

Charlotte was a commoner, and the difference between their statuses was like the gap between heaven and earth.

Without fail, Charlotte had stubbornly remained by his side for years, no matter what people had said about him. It was because deep in her heart, under lock and key, there was a certain forbidden emotion that she had been subconsciously holding back all this time.

And now...her secret feelings for him could no longer be suppressed.

“That was rather fast. I suppose that shows just how much this girl means to you.”

The scene was set at the rotten remains of the Terminal, shrouded in darkness, and the youth made his opening appearance on the stage. Staring at him now, Charlotte finally realized one thing: when she had pictured him dedicating the rest of his life to Carina Little Daryth...Charlotte Lily Huzak could no longer ignore the emotions thrumming in her heart.

“You,” he hissed. “Let go of Charlotte. Right. *Now.*”

These mundane, carefree days with him at Kirsch Mage Institute are my whole world. I want to be with him, not just in the past, but today, tomorrow, and from now on. I can't even imagine a future where we're apart.

“Leading candidate for the next Guardian Knight,” Yugiri addressed. “I shall now see whether or not you are qualified for that title.”

Charlotte stared at the young man who had apparently decided to become the Guardian Knight. And sure enough, in her eyes, he still looked chubby in all respects, something that never changed.

Chapter 5: Professor Yugiri

The mountain obscured the amber evening sky, and the forest had already been engulfed by darkness. I pressed on into its depths, inching ever closer towards the inky abyss of the forest that even moonlight shied away from.

I walked on with a silent and grim determination. Up until now, I had experienced many unbelievable things in my life. However, besides the day when I learned the plot of the anime, I could swear that today was *the* most unexpected day of them all.

Corpses of monsters decorated the trackless path I traveled down. *Is my enemy a human or a monster?* I wondered. The Great Spirit of Wind, who had dealt a devastating blow to a section of the forest, had refused to the bitter end to tell me anything about the being that had defeated them. However, on their deathbed...they had said that Charlotte was definitely down this path.

“Wait, it’s not like the spirit actually *died* or anything,” I retorted at myself, since there was nobody around to react to my thoughts.

I left Altanger there because it seemed like something had broken the spirit’s will. Whoever is waiting for me up ahead is extremely powerful and strong enough to render the Great Spirit despondent... They also took Charlotte, so there’s no way I can sit back and wait for the spirit to be ready to come with me again.

I snorted to myself. *This is the worst-case scenario turned into reality, where even the Great Spirit of Wind has lost. And yet...why am I so calm? Well, that’s because I happen to have an idea of just who my enemy is.*

“It’s probably exactly what the Great Spirit of Wind mentioned a while ago...”

Altanger had warned me to be wary of Nanatrij because she had the habit of headhunting talented mages and was obsessed with collecting capable people. The only possible candidate with the ability to tear Altanger’s heart to shreds like that was *her*.

If that girl was the one lying in wait, the situation was still salvageable. *After all, even in the anime, she had taken Alicia as a hostage and pressured Shuya to join her cause. I know how she operates.*

“Hmm. I suppose I’ll sift through my anime knowledge and come up with a few pieces of info that might interest her...” I muttered to myself.

As I trudged on, little by little, the darkness seemed to grow deeper and deeper. Seeing this, I grew confident that my guess had been right on the mark. *A mage is ahead of here...and a terrifying one at that.*

Eventually, I arrived at a clearing with an abnormal aura that didn’t match its surroundings at all.

“With these decaying ruins here... This must be the Terminal. I’ve heard about it in rumors, but it’s the first time I’ve seen it in person.”

What was left of the deserted buildings here stood in rows, and the color of their walls had long faded. Spiderwebs and overgrown weeds draped over their surfaces like tapestries. There were dozens of these structures crammed in this area and they had probably been abandoned for decades. All of them were in ruin. It was almost like a small, forsaken village completely devoid of all movement.

According to the rumors, years ago, professors from Kirsch had performed countless dubious experiments here that had toyed with the lives of living beings. That apparently was the reason why there was an absence of living creatures here in the Terminal. It was a taboo place that forest animals and even monsters stayed away from.

And here, in these ruins, I found *her* glowing under the moonlight.

“You,” I hissed. “Let go of Charlotte. Right. *Now.*”

Our eyes met, and Charlotte’s were clearly begging me for help. However, my retainer collapsed in the blink of an eye. The person holding Charlotte hostage had knocked her out with some kind of spell.

Unforgivable. But before such fury overtook my senses, the question of why this was happening appeared in my head, because the enemy catching my

retainer before she fell onto the ground was a woman I knew very well.

“That was rather fast. I suppose that shows just how much this girl means to you,” she said.

The enemy before me *wasn't* the Great Spirit of Darkness. In fact, the perpetrator completely took me by surprise. She was a beauty with a radiant, icy aura and a sharp, intelligent air who was nearly the same as always. She was the newest professor at Kirsch Mage Institute who came to campus as Professor Loco Moco's substitute.

“May I ask you something, Professor Yugiri?” I began slowly. “What the hell are you doing?”

A beam of moonlight fell over them from the sky, almost like a spotlight, and lit up the scene perfectly. It was unquestionable: Professor Yugiri was the one who had seized Charlotte.

My relationship with Professor Yugiri couldn't be labeled as “good” by any standard. Professor Yugiri despised me, likely because I had been directly nominated as the Guardian Knight by the queen.

However, from what I knew, her relationship with Charlotte wasn't terrible in the least. I had once come across the professor yelling at my retainer, but Charlotte had said that she continued being the professor's assistant even after that. Charlotte had earned a small fortune from this job, and I had also heard that she was the only assistant who had lasted that long.

“Stop there, Slowe Denning. Don't get any closer.”

“What if I did?”

“Isn't it obvious? I set up this situation so that we can have a proper discussion. And as you can see, this girl is a hostage.”

“If all you wanted to do was talk, we could've done that all day at school. At any rate, there was no need for you to bring Charlotte here like this.”

“I needed confirmation, you see. I wanted to know how special this girl is to you.”

Professor Yugiri's target wasn't Charlotte; it was me. It was clear that because of *me*, my retainer had been implicated despite having nothing to do with all this.

"Slowe Denning. Were you not afraid when you came across the fallen Great Spirit?"

I clenched my teeth and didn't give an answer.

"Now, now, you don't have to look at me with such fierce eyes. That was the Great Spirit of Wind, wasn't it? Someone under the protection of such a being can indicate many things, but...let's leave her identity to one side for now. Like I have mentioned, my objective is you."

My thoughts whirled at a dizzying speed. *No way, did Professor Yugiri realize who Charlotte is? Was she the one who defeated the Great Spirit of Wind? Impossible. That can't be. The Great Spirit could easily beat me without breaking a sweat if they unleashed their true abilities... Damn it, nothing makes sense.* My mind couldn't keep up with the scene in front of me, and my frustration only stacked higher and higher.

"I shall admit this, Slowe Denning. I was jealous of you. Someone more than a decade younger than me was given the recognition I wanted and was acknowledged as worthy of the title of Guardian Knight. I had been bitter. I only took over Loco Moco Highland's position for a mission in the first place, and that mission was to guide you onto the path of knighthood. When I first arrived at Kirsch, I was wallowing in self-pity."

"Never have I said that I want to become the Guardian Knight, not even once," I said slowly.

"Indeed. And that was all the more reason to hate you. 'How was this boy in any way fitting for the Guardian Knight?' I asked myself. I couldn't understand what Her Highness had been thinking."

"If you want to talk, we can talk as much as you'd like. Just let Charlotte—"

"I sought out information about you from the noble students, and commoner students as well. And one day, I noticed a certain detail that I had missed. Including during the incident with No Face, you've constantly kept an eye out

for any unusual occurrences going on at Kirsch. Because of that, ever so slightly, I began to understand why Her Highness recommended you for the position.”

After saying her piece, Professor Yugiri fell silent for a while.

Something is definitely off here... What's with her? I'm not getting through to her at all. At the very least, she clearly wasn't this talkative before. She wasn't this one-sided about her interactions either.

Even as I pondered this, she was going on with her monologue again after that earlier period of silence. She almost seemed as if she was venting about all her pent-up feelings to me, and in the process, she even looked like she was hurting herself with her own words. It gave me the creeps.

“I am aware of what I was doing. I know whom I was interested in, and to whom I sold information. I have done something irredeemable. I am already done for.”

“Professor,” I began haltingly, “please, calm down a little.”

“What I have done is unforgivable. I am finished. I'm now connected to someone I mustn't be involved with, but I had never thought that she would be in a place like this.”

The composed Royal Knight I had known was nowhere to be found, and she instead seemed almost childlike before me. She couldn't control her emotions and was in a very precarious state. To me, the professor had seemed to always maintain a firm, dauntless demeanor, so I was taken aback by this expression of fragility.

However, at the same time, I was desperately looking for an opening. *I need to save Charlotte as soon as I can! But...I can't find an opening.*

“Slowe Denning, you ought to become the Guardian Knight. This girl is clearly in your way.” Professor Yugiri swung her sword and held it against *Charlotte's* neck. “If this girl disappears, there probably won't be any lingering attachments to hold you back.”

“Professor, you have gone *mad*.”

“Perhaps. I'm likely well within the realm of insanity now. However, I am loyal

to Her Majesty and am simply following her orders.”

“There is no way that she would order such a thing.”

The professor paused. “You know nothing about how dreadful Her Highness can be. She told me that my role is to lead you onto the path of becoming the true Guardian Knight. In that case, just like Sir Delfrey, you must—”

The professor had an image of the ideal Guardian Knight in her mind. It was probably the current Moonlit Guardian Knight, the man who had dedicated his very life to becoming the embodiment of that title and had devoted his whole being to the royal family. *Man, leave me out of this, will you?! Don't group me together with that ascetic guy!*

“Professor Yugiri, if you're planning on continuing this nonsense, I will have to resort to force,” I warned.

“Slowe Denning, you are indeed powerful, and if this had been the past me, I would never be able to get a hit in on you. However, she has granted me a power that will allow me to test you. The incantation she taught me was...*Release.*”

An emblem appeared on the professor's forehead: a familiar symbol of a coiled-up snake. Professor Yugiri's eyes then turned red, and an immense storm of mana raged from within her. This kind of power could rival that of a Great Spirit!

However, I had heard of this kind of transformation before. “Professor! Don't tell me, that power is...!”

I finally figured out the culprit who had warped the professor to such an extent. *I see, my first assumption was wrong. The conqueror of the Great Spirit of Wind wasn't Nanatrij, nor was it Professor Yugiri... It was the Dream Dealer Witch. The woman who is one of the Three Musketeers, the pride of the Dustour Empire.*

Professor Yugiri faced me with a contented smile plastered on her face. It was ghastly. I was filled with a sense of unease, as if any movement or sound on my part would lead to her gobbling me right up.

This spell that swiftly turned the tides and reversed the power balance

between us and put me at a disadvantage is... “Professor Yugiri... I shall ask this just in case, but do you know what kind of state you are in right now?”

“I do. I wish to give you a trial out of my own free will.”

I took extra care in my actions so that I wouldn't provoke the professor. *Think, Slowe, think! Charlotte is right next to her. How do I get her away to a safe place?*

My thoughts whirled as I thought of a good reply. “No, that isn't so. Professor, you are being controlled by the enemy like a puppet right now. I have known for a while that you were loyal to your occupation to a fault, but right now, you are *far* from normal.”

“If I didn't know better, I'd think that you were implying that I have been brainwashed.”

The witch of the Dustour Empire, Francisca, was one of the Three Musketeers and an S-class adventurer in her own right. There weren't that many dungeon expeditions in this Dustour hero's record, but in those few excursions, she had taken down several vicious dungeons in the north that earned her the rank of S-class!

She was the founder of the famed Potion Dealer Association and a living legend who had reached a peerless level of skill in water magic. She had also mastered the craft of brainwashing magic. If the rumors were true, her water elixirs had given average Dustour soldiers enough power to defeat even veteran mages. However, the side effects had been so vile that Nanatrij had apparently banned her from brewing them again!

“Slowe Denning, if this girl disappears, you'll be able to become the Guardian Knight with no further issues.”

Ugh, what the heck is going on?! I don't know why she has been brainwashed by the witch, and hey, where the hell did they meet anyway?! She's ignoring everything I say too... What's with her?!

Suddenly, the professor moved with a grunt. Her sword swung in a wide arc.

Without a second thought, I ducked my head. There was the sound of something sliding behind me, followed by thunderous thuds as something fell

over. Nervously, I turned my head, and there I found a large tree on the ground with a clean, diagonal cut that neatly intersected its trunk.

“Wh...Whoa...” I think it’s pretty appropriate to say that display nearly scared me to death! If I hadn’t managed to dodge, my head would have bid a quick farewell to my body. Tentatively, I touched my neck. *Okay, good, I’m still alive. Knowing that is enough for me.*

“Oink...” I bleated. *But, uh... Am I really okay? Can I actually stop this professor?*



After a while, I came to a conclusion. *Nope, never! In her current state, I could only win against the professor in my wildest dreams.*

“What’s wrong? Why aren’t you fighting back?! Show me your strength!”

“Uhhhh, even if you say that, I’ll die if I stop moving, so no!” I blurted that all out in one breath before letting out a long shriek of fear. Something just barely missed my neck and I broke out in a cold sweat. *That was the professor’s spell. Poisonous fog, huh.*

It’s pretty clear at this point that I’m running for my life right now, away from that witch-controlled professor! She’s my opponent in this fierce race through the forest in the dead of night. I guess this will burn a lot of calories and it’ll be good for my figure...but this is no time to joke around!

The professor probably wasn’t all that far behind me. In a desperate effort to buy time, I turned around and fired off a few spells, but since she yelled at me without pause, those spells probably didn’t do much.

“Slowe Denning, I have thoroughly combed through your past. You have impressive talent, and you certainly are worthy of the title of the Prodigy of Wind! However, I am not inferior to you! I am in peak condition today!”

“Like I said, it’s all because you are under someone else’s control! The woman who brainwashed you isn’t any old potion dealer; she’s one of the Three Musketeers! What in the world happened?!”

“Running away won’t get you any closer to the title of Guardian Knight, Slowe

Denning!”

“I repeat, I never said that I want to become the Guardian Knight, not even once! Stop forcing your assumptions on me! I have also said *many times* that you’re being manipulated, Professor! That power you’re wielding is eating away at your life!”

She barked out a short, almost maniacal laugh. “It is a simple matter! Just like how you have hardened your resolve, I, too, have hardened mine!”

Nothing seems to be getting through to her. I guess it’s because the witch has bound her memories. Right now, the professor is being manipulated to carry out the whims of the Dream Dealer Witch. But why was she turned into a puppet in the first place? How did those two meet? Ugh, jeez, none of this makes sense!

“Hey, witch! Francisca!” I yelled. “I know what you’re doing! You’re brainwashing the professor! Listen to me and come on out! If you show yourself and release the professor, I’ll let you off this once, you hear me?!”

“Slowe Denning! Why are you shouting to yourself? Hey, I told you to stop running!”

“Professor Yugiri, please, *please* stop it with the poison! I really *will* die at this rate! If I kick the bucket, doesn’t that mean you failed Her Majesty’s orders? Think about it! Didn’t you just say that you think I am worthy of knighthood?!”

“If you die here, that means you are undeserving and ought to face such a fate!”

“Where did you get such a wild idea from?!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the professor’s sword. During our chase, she had been firing poisonous fog at me with it, and its blade was stained a foul blackish purple. *If that sword reaches me, that’s the end of the road for me, folks!*

In the middle of all this, I had spotted a calm river beside us. However, the moment a droplet of Professor Yugiri’s poison fell into it, the crystal clear water was tainted purple and dozens of fish floated to the surface. *Even after being diluted by the river water, it’s still so potent. If that poisonous blade strikes me...*

I shivered at the thought.

Perhaps the professor's insane actions triggered something within the monsters hidden in the depths of the forest as well because they would appear and attack her from time to time. I didn't have to look behind me to know the result of the scuffle though. I just knew that all of the attacking monsters were now on the ground, drooling and clawing at their throats. Thanks to the monsters' impulsive suicide attacks, I was somehow able to maintain a constant distance from the professor.

"Professor! Please come back to your senses!" Though running away was at the top of my list, I still tried to persuade the professor along the way. I wanted her to realize what kind of state she was in as quickly as possible.

"Slowe Denning, what a surprise! Despite being out of shape, you have a considerable amount of stamina!"

I took in a deep breath and willed my feet to work harder. "Yeah, that's because I took measures to make sure I have a lot of energy...but if I'd known this was going to happen to me, I would have worked harder to trim down! Still, Professor Yugiri! No matter how you look at it, even if this probably isn't the best way to put it, someone like me trying to run away and escape from a knight like you is *crazy*!"

"What's so crazy about it?!"

"Being in good shape wouldn't be enough to flip the difference of power between us... You have trained as a knight for a long time, so you should realize how abnormally strong you are right now! You are an honorable Royal Knight of the Country of Knights!"

In the anime, the Dream Dealer Witch's human puppets had both their natural power limits and rationality removed. Unaware of the fact that they were being manipulated, they would dance in the palm of the witch's hand until their bitter ends. But if someone was able to wake them up by forcing them to realize their peculiar condition...

"Professor, you really are under someone's influence! She is one of Dustour's Three Musketeers, the Dream Dealer Witch, unparalleled in the realm of water magic! Despite being a Royal Knight, you are—"

“Shut up!” she snapped. “I don’t want to hear anything from you! You’re doing nothing but running and hiding!”

I wheezed hard as I snorted. Even after that conversation, this game of tag went on for quite a long while. At this point, we were no longer in the forest, but in an abundant sea of trees.

The darkness was dense, without a shred of moonlight granting me sight. Running around while staying unharmed was becoming an impossible feat. I tripped over branches, twigs, and thick roots protruding from the ground many times.

Even as injuries began to litter my whole body, the gears in my mind continued to turn. *Why did the witch approach her? Wait, did she do it under Nanatrij’s orders? But that doesn’t add up because she withdrew her armies... Why would she attack a Royal Knight? Could the witch be acting on her own desires? Ah, damn it, I’m drawing a complete blank here!*

“Oiiink...” I panted, trying to catch my breath. I kept up this game of cat and mouse, moving my legs forward without another thought in my mind. I coughed and hacked as I whimpered, “Char...lotte... Oink...”

If I had stayed in the Terminal’s ruins, there would have been a high chance that Charlotte could be hurt in the aftermath of our battle. That was why I had chosen to raise a barrier around her and get out of there. “Oi...nk...”

Now, after being chased in a big circle, we ended up in that place once again. Even with the gentle caress of moonlight from the clearing above, this rotting village still looked as if it were sinking into a dreary shadow.

“I see, we have returned to the Terminal. Slowe Denning...are you done trying to flee?”

“Yes... It’s over. Don’t you know, Professor Yugiri, that sudden, vigorous exercise isn’t good for one’s body? We hadn’t even done warm-up stretches or anything...”

“In other words, you’ve finally given up, haven’t you?”

“Well, I don’t know about that...” *But... Okay, good. Charlotte’s not around. My plan to buy time for Charlotte to escape was a success. The ideal scenario would be the Great Spirit of Wind rescuing her, but I’m not sure whether that was the case or not...*

“You eluded me for such a long time, but you suddenly seem rather composed. Relaxed, even... I had my doubts, but I see now, that’s how it is. That entire charade was so that you could buy enough time for your retainer to leave this area. You seemed to be panicking, but you’re actually rather cool and collected, aren’t you?”

“You think that, huh... However, aren’t you in the same boat in that respect, Professor?”

The Great Spirit of Wind had seemed to have a mental breakdown, but I had the feeling that they would snap out of it and rush here to save Charlotte if she was in danger. After all, Charlotte held top priority in their heart. *And now, I know why that guy had been so spooked. They were up against the witch, whom they had once lost to in Huzak.*

The professor paused. “The same? What do you mean by that?”

“Please be honest with me, Professor Yugiri. You’ve already realized it, haven’t you?”

The professor closed her mouth and didn’t reply.

She had gained power superior to mine and had acted in a despicable manner by taking Charlotte as a hostage. Such an action was a disgrace to the Order, but she hadn’t had a shred of doubt about doing it at all. During our chase, I had insistently pointed out how unnatural her actions had been. *Did you really think I kept talking so long for no good reason?*

“Some time into your chase, your spells started to lose their edge. From what I know, her victims haven’t ever embraced her brainwashing after noticing it. But...”

Getting Charlotte out of the battle zone hadn’t been my only goal. I also needed time to try to hammer some sense into the professor, even if I was only slightly successful. And indeed, her spells gradually held less and less force.

“I won’t give you my gratitude,” she said at length, “for your words have made me recall the most nightmarish of memories.”

“Professor... What in the world happened to you?”

“I have never felt worse in my life. This power over poisons... My power was never so repulsive. How did I forget the disgusting things that happened to my body only moments before?”

“Then, Professor, you really were...”

“I was drenched from head to toe in her enchantments. There’s no need to speak any further, Slowe Denning. I am more aware than anyone else of the state of my body. I probably won’t even be standing come sunrise.”

Well, damn. She already knows everything there is to know. She knows what’s happening to her body and why she was able to muster up more power than she usually could, as well as the fact that she is now turning her back on the country she swore fealty to.

Furthermore, as a Royal Knight...she probably also knows enough about the nature of the witch’s magic. She is one of the most infamously powerful entities of a hostile nation.

“I... No, the Royal Knight Yugiri Asahi likely died the moment that witch bestowed her power upon me. My body won’t heed my will at all, and in this state, I could never face the lords and ladies I once devoted my loyalty to. In that case, in my last moments, I want to die fulfilling the orders of Her Majesty.”

“That’s not...”

“Slowe Denning, you probably hold a grudge against me for dragging you into this, but please forgive me. This is the only way of life I know.”

She didn’t seem to plan on talking about the tragedy that had befallen her. Right now, she was facing me with full acceptance of everything that had happened. *Is it really that important to her?* I thought numbly. *Is something stupid like guiding me onto the path of the Guardian Knight that much more important to her than her own life?*

“Professor...”

“I have no right to ask this of you, but...I want to go down with the pride of a Royal Knight burning in my heart.”

The obvious and brutal truth was that the professor was beyond salvation now. It was undeniable: I could see the grotesque spirits coiling around her body.

She laughed, perhaps self-deprecatingly. “The pathetic Royal Knight who fell into enemy hands would be cremated by the young Guardian Knight. Slowe Denning, with this, there will be a new page in your epic to follow your dragon slaying.”

I felt sick to my stomach. I didn’t know whether the witch had approached the professor and brainwashed her because of Nanatrij or not, but it didn’t matter. This was something that had *never* happened in the anime. All in all, I was sure that it was my fault Professor Yugiri had been taken advantage of by the enemy, and I felt awful.

“That is...a terrible joke. Professor, your sense of humor is atrocious.”

“Don’t be like that. I *am* trying my best to be considerate and make fighting me easier for you.”

“I would rather not receive that sort of kindness...”

“Well, this begins the final lesson of Yugiri Asahi. Having only one student in the audience is a little lonely...but if you wish to survive, come at me with all your might!”

“I can’t die in a place like this, so please prepare yourself... *Gravity Manipulation.*”

While casting the spell that had felled the black dragon, I thought back to all those students who had surrounded her in her last class at school. *If I have to point out one regret I have...it’s that I should have talked with her more.*

But it was much too late to think about that now.



Charlotte hid inside one of the buildings in the ruins and stared at the battle between the two, sneakily poking her head out from behind a crumbling wall.

She was the only other person who knew what had happened to the Royal Knight. “Professor Yugiri... Why...?”

Before her eyes, a battle was playing out between the two figures. However, Slowe was on the complete defensive, only blocking Yugiri’s attacks and her attempts to close in. A certain *something* flicked off the woman’s sword from time to time and decayed the earth, the ruins, and even the plants. *Is that poison?* Charlotte thought. She couldn’t really make out what exactly it was because of the distance, but she suspected that nothing good would come out of touching it. Perhaps that was why Slowe seemed to be focusing wholly on avoiding the professor’s attacks.

Charlotte tilted her head. “Hm?”

Something was off. From what Charlotte had heard, Slowe and Yugiri had brawled before during a lesson and it had ended in Yugiri’s defeat. But now, no matter how she thought about it, it was clear that the woman was on the offensive while Slowe retreated and evaded her advance.

The environment was not spared from the repercussions of the fight and the already-crumbling buildings fully collapsed one after another. Rubble flew about in the air in a lethal dance.

Charlotte bit her lip. “No way... At this rate, Master Slowe will...”

Charlotte hadn’t directly heard from Slowe about his fight with the professor on the training field, but if she remembered the gossip about it correctly, it had been an overwhelming victory on his side.

However, that wasn’t the case now. Even Charlotte was able to tell that Slowe would definitely lose if the battle continued as it was.

A sudden voice interrupted Charlotte’s thoughts. “Stop right there. There isn’t a single thing *you* can do about it.”

“Huh?!” Charlotte’s eyes widened as she looked at the source of the voice.

It was a girl, considerably smaller than her. Her long hair, gray like ash, swayed in the air as her big, round eyes of the same color stared hard at Charlotte.

The girl was poking her head out ever so slightly from behind a wall to watch the battle, just like Charlotte. The most shocking thing, however, was the fact that Charlotte hadn't noticed her at all despite being right beside her.

"If you get involved, Slowe Denning's fight will instead turn into a battle to protect you. If that happens, the stalemate will be broken. The victor will be decided in an instant."

"Wh-Who...are you?" Just as the question left her lips, however, Charlotte regretted asking such a foolish thing. She didn't even have to ask.

The being had taken on the form of a human girl, and for a moment, Charlotte had thought that was exactly what she was. *How stupid was I to assume that?* However, when those large, ashen eyes focused on her, the girl's very presence was enough to intimidate Charlotte. It was a crushing, irrational fear that overwhelmed all logic and reason, almost as if the young woman had laid her eyes upon something more than human.

"Well, who do you think I am?"

Hearing the small girl's voice, Charlotte's pulse raced. Charlotte half gasped, half whimpered.

"Hm? What do you think?" the ashen-haired girl asked again.

The girl narrowed her eyes, and Charlotte felt a chill right down to her bones, as if someone had squeezed her heart to the point of bursting. The overwhelming pressure made it hard for her to breathe.

"Hey, come on. You were with the Great Spirit of Wind for a long time, right? You already know who I am, don't you? So, what do you think?"



The Great Spirit of Wind had said that one could recognize the ruler of the Dustour Empire with just one look. Though she appeared to be a human, it would be immediately clear that she was an existence beyond humanity.

The girl in front of Charlotte didn't have a single flaw; she was a perfect being that transcended the limits of human beauty. The retainer wouldn't have batted an eye if someone had told her that the girl was a doll.

However, she also remembered that the Great Spirit of Wind had said that if Charlotte was ever unsure, she could just ask for the entity's name because that transcendent being didn't lie.

Charlotte's voice came out shaky. "M-May I...ask for your name...?"

Back when the Great Spirit had made such a statement, Charlotte hadn't understood why Nanatrij would be honest about her identity, but now it made complete sense. What was there for her to hide when talking to someone as unthreatening as an ant?

"I am the Great Spirit of Darkness, Nanatrij," the girl said simply.

Was despair the right reaction after hearing that name? Charlotte wondered. The four great powers of the south had formed an alliance and had made preparations to combat the planned invasion by the empire in the north. The empire was a superpower that a single country like Daryth, the Country of Knights, could never put up a meaningful resistance against. And now, the heart of the Dustour Empire stood before Charlotte, but she did not drown in fear.

"Please return Professor Yugiri to normal... Please, I beg you..." Charlotte pleaded.

There was just one thought in Charlotte's head. *The ghostly woman did something to Professor Yugiri, and then the professor went mad. But if Lady Nanatrij were to act... She is the superior of the Three Musketeers, isn't she? She might be able to return the professor to normal. After all, that woman said that her actions contradict the will of the Great Spirit of Darkness.*

"You're not surprised after hearing my name? Wow, the princess of Huzak sure has guts."

“Wha...”

“Just now, the Great Spirit of Wind found me and attacked me. I beat that spirit into submission, but they warned me to keep my hands off you or something like that, you see. More importantly, though, there’s something I wanted to ask you. The one who destroyed your homeland is, well... To sum it up, she’s my subordinate who brainwashed that knight over there. It’s not like I directly ordered her to do that or anything, but I’m indirectly at fault. So, Charlotte Lily Huzak, that means I’m your enemy. Are you really imploring your *enemy* to help you?”

Like a volcano, an emotion burst forth like lava from Charlotte’s heart. Her ruined homeland, the reason for her solitude... The mastermind behind all that was *right here*. Asking Charlotte to make a rational decision was unreasonable. *That’s right. Everything started because of this Great Spirit of Darkness. She even said it herself!*

“The choice is yours. Will you treat me with hostility? Or...will you lower your head to me, your foe, and entreat me to save him?”

There was no hesitation. Charlotte’s heart was already set. “Please save Master Slowe.”

To Charlotte, the truly important thing was the present, not the past. She had learned during their trip through Huzak that there were more important things than being chained down by remnants of days gone by. She had made up her mind that she would live her new life, and by extension her future, to the fullest. She had also returned to House Denning—albeit for a short while—and though Slowe had been a hermit the whole time, many members of their family continued to entrust Slowe to her. There was no way she could let go of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity falling into her lap.

“You wouldn’t have a better chance to get back at me, you know? I’m standing right here, completely free for the taking. Would you still—”

Charlotte cut her off. “We can talk as much as we want about it later, but we do not have time right now.”

“Hm, so at the very least, you *do* get how awful things are right now, I see. But well, as they say, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. I came to this land

to stop my subordinate, and if Slowe Denning died along the way, things would be pretty bothersome for me. In that case, I'll weaken that knight first. The plan is—"

"Please wait. There is another thing I wish to ask of you..."

"More? Do you know what kind of position you're in right now?"

Charlotte hesitated but continued on. "Please save Professor Yugiri too... I'm begging you..."

Sometimes, one's strength was in the heart.

The Great Spirit of Darkness was taken aback. *This girl is greedy, she thought. She stands her ground, even against me. Is there a single child in the Dustour Empire who could voice their selfish desires so boldly, I wonder? Likely not.*

"You're an interesting one..." Nanatrij quirked the corners of her lips. "I like you."

Charlotte thought back to another detail that the Great Spirit of Wind had said about the Great Spirit of Darkness. They had mentioned that Nanatrij was a vexing character who was detestable but also impossible to hate.

The unique spirit, who had control over magic of all elements despite being called the Great Spirit of Darkness, addressed the young woman. "Listen carefully, Charlotte. Everything depends on one key point: whether you'll be able to persuade Slowe Denning or not."



"As expected, maintaining *Gravity Manipulation* for a long time is rough... With the black dragon, the Great Spirit of Wind helped me out a little bit, but now..."

I needed to kill Professor Yugiri in this place. If news that a Royal Knight was exploited by the Dustour Empire got out, the people would be infuriated. They'd start doubting the peace treaty, and war would be unavoidable.

"Damn it, that didn't work either!" I cursed. "Even after the professor practically fainted, the witch's spell...hasn't broken..."

But can I really do this? Even if she has become a puppet of my enemy, she

was my professor!

However, I know she has already braced herself for the consequences...so what is there to hesitate about now? This is what the professor wants. Being used by the enemy as a Royal Knight must be the epitome of disgrace to her.

I must do it. Finally hardening my resolve, I decided that I would put an end to her life. But suddenly...

“Master Slowe! Listen to this!” The voice belonged to *her*, the young woman who was supposed to be far away from this place by now.

On reflex, I scoured the area for the girl, and I found her. “Charlotte! Why are you still here?!”

She was poking her head out from behind a broken wall on the second floor of one of the slanting ruins. The building looked as if it could collapse at any time. *It's fine if she hasn't gotten away, but if she was planning on sticking around, she should have stayed hidden!* I wanted to scold her, asking what in the world she was thinking when she had chosen now of all times to show herself, but...

My jaw dropped as I stared with wide eyes at the silhouette next to her.

Finally composed enough to speak, I said, “And do you even know *who you're with?!?*”

“Master Slowe! Um, this isn't what you think!”

“Charlotte, get out of there immediately!”

But even after my warning, she remained still. *What is she even thinking? Has she not realized who the girl standing next to her is? No, that's impossible. That being takes on the shape of a human but is far from one. The Great Spirit of Wind said that she'd be able to recognize the spirit immediately!*

But why? Why is she here?

“Nanatrij! Get away from Charlotte!” I yelled.

“Master Slowe! Please, *please* listen to what I have to say!”

That girl is the heart of the Dustour Empire. If she's here, does that mean that

everything was her ploy, including the witch turning the professor into a puppet? That's the worst-case scenario among all the terrible possibilities I can think of because that means...that everything had been a scheme to deceive the south. The future peace that the messenger relayed was all a lie if that's true!

"You! Nanatrij!" I hissed. "The woman controlling Professor Yugiri is your subordinate, isn't she?! Did you lie to us the entire time?! Answer me! Nanatrij, explain yourself!"

A pause. "You're very noisy." She wasn't raising her voice, but it still rang out clear as a bell across the area.

And it was because of how distinctly I heard her that my anger welled up in an uncontrollable torrent at her outrageous actions. "What do you mean by 'noisy,' huh?! Sorry if you're blind, but because of *your* subordinate, I—"

"You're shouting at the wrong person because I had nothing to do with it." She sighed. "Don't be so full of yourself and blame others for no reason."

"What?! Look who's talking!" I snapped.

"You should learn from this girl and be a little more chill. Don't you agree, Charlotte?"

"Master Slowe," Charlotte spoke up. "You might find it hard to believe, but this honorable lady is our ally!"

I was having a mental breakdown. "You... Whaaat?!" *The Great Spirit of Darkness is our ally? That girl is our enemy through and through, and nobody could ever argue against that! Is Charlotte being deceived?*

No, it doesn't seem that way... Charlotte is quite composed right now. It might have taken me a while to realize that something was off with the professor, but there's no way I'd ever miss something like that when it comes to Charlotte.

"Then try explaining this! Your subordinate, one of the Three Musketeers, has brainwashed this woman! I'd like to see you talk yourself out of this one!" I scoffed.

Professor Yugiri was slightly out of it and pinned to the ground by my *Gravity Manipulation* spell. She was probably feeling pressure on her whole body, as if

she was being crushed and flattened. A run-of-the-mill mage would have collapsed in a heap on the ground and been out cold long ago, but she still managed to barely cling on to her consciousness... *She's very tough.*

Furthermore, I'm forcing her down with my full abilities, but she's digging her palms into the ground and scratching at it noisily with her nails. It's like a scene out of a horror movie.

"Even someone like me can't fully control everything... This is essentially the same as what happened in Zenelaus. I mean, that probably doesn't make any sense to you, but..." She shrugged.

With those words alone, I was able to read between the lines and understand what the spirit meant. I knew that the battle in Zenelaus had occurred because the Living Dead had ignored Nanatrij's orders and acted of his own accord.

I inhaled sharply.

"You don't look like you're doing so hot, Slowe Denning," Nanatrij commented.

"If you claim that this wasn't your will, then save her! Instead of, you know, just standing there and watching the show!"

The spell I was using to pin down the professor rivaled the force that had brought down that black dragon. However, the professor seemed like she would recover at any moment.

"I can't do that."

"Why?! Isn't the witch going against your orders?!"

"You've taken out two of my subordinates," the spirit reminded me. "Why should I lend you a hand? And save *her*, you say? You should be able to do that yourself."

I didn't know what the spirit was going on about. *You know, all these ridiculous things happening in succession are already overwhelming, including Nanatrij being right next to Charlotte! One moment, the world was heading towards a peaceful future, and then the next, not one, but two of the empire's top personnel appeared! What the heck did I do to deserve this?!*

“Master Slowe, please believe her!” Charlotte exclaimed. “Lady Nanatrij is on our side, and...um, she just said that you’d also figure it out if you approach Professor Yugiri!”

I fell silent. *On a normal day, I definitely wouldn’t entertain this kind of crazy idea. Unconditionally putting faith in the words of my enemy? Yeah, I know, I’m not right in the head. But...Charlotte is the one telling me this.*

I suppressed a sigh. “Tell me more.”

“Curious. That made you awfully compliant.” Nanatrij raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, shut up. I’m not putting my faith in you; it’s Charlotte whom I wholeheartedly trust,” I rebuked.

“Master Slowe! Lady Nanatrij said you should get even closer to Professor Yugiri!”

You...must be kidding me, right? Is the spirit telling me to jump right into the arms of the professor when she’s like this?! If I get close enough to be within the reach of her sword, someone like me would immediately lose my head with a clean slice! Besides, the professor is a poison user, so getting closer is practically suicide...

I stood rooted to my spot in silence for a long time, holding an internal debate about what I should do, until the professor finally began to overcome my spell. *I would have loved it if she would just stay down there and kiss the ground forever, but I guess that’s wishful thinking.*

I clicked my tongue. “Damn, I’m out of time!”

“Slowe...Denning! So *this* is...the power that saved Kirsch!” The professor struggled with every word that made it out of her mouth. “To think that you...would use the spell you used on a *dragon* on me... You are horrendous!”

“Well, you were the one who said to come at you with all my might, Professor...”

Professor Yugiri let out a short, perhaps delighted, laugh. “True, I did! But wait, I was out of it for a while... Were you...talking to someone just now?”

“I was only cursing the hell out of this stupid, *stupid* situation!”

“I see...” There was a wry note in her voice. “It is a rather difficult one for the both of us.”

From her position on the ground, Professor Yugiri couldn't see Charlotte and the Great Spirit of Darkness as the two had barricaded themselves inside the ruins. From the looks of it, the Great Spirit was continuously enchanting the building with a glamour spell that made it difficult to see them, and the professor hadn't even noticed our shouting session earlier. That was a sigh of relief for me...but the fact that her life force was being ravished greedily by spirits also made it difficult for her to notice other things... *And now she even managed to stand up. Perfect, just perfect!* I was at my wits' end.

“Professor, being able to get back up in such a short time means that your power has surpassed that of a dragon, you know that?”

“Ha ha, so I'm currently greater than such a beast...” she laughed. “You must tell me one thing though, Slowe Denning. Am I frightening right now, even to someone of your capabilities?”

“You really are. You are terrifying, especially considering that I would be dead meat the moment that the poison flying off your sword landed a hit.”

“I see; I was right... But in my current state, doing this seems perfectly normal. In my mind, this seems to be how I've always acted. Despite thinking that something is wrong, I can't question my actions. This is probably what they call having a broken mind.”

I was gravely silent as I listened to the professor talk.

“Look at me. I've been reduced to nothing more than a lowly woman who doesn't deserve to live, whether it be as a knight, as a noble, or even as a human being.”

After a moment where neither of us could speak, the professor continued. “Slowe Denning, you are powerful. You possess true strength, a kind that differs from this cheap imitation that I'm wielding in the present.”

There was a mountain of difference between this battle and when I had fought Dreibach Steibelt in Zenelaus. The opponent I was facing right now had regained her rationality.

The professor finished her speech in a somber tone filled with despair. “I see that you don’t plan on running around anymore.”

“I don’t. I cannot, and must not, run away from you with how things are, Professor.”

Professor Yugiri knew that her life had nearly burned down to the end of its wick. I couldn’t do such a thing to her.

To add to that, Charlotte had said that if I observed her from up close, I might catch on to something. I didn’t need any evidence to convince me of her words. I trusted Charlotte, and I had no intention of shying away like a mouse.

“Will I die first, or will you?” she mused. “But, if you win... Please finish me off in an instant. To tell you the truth, I can’t tolerate pain.”

My eyes widened. “I didn’t expect that. Can I spread that around school?”

“You will *not*. I was able to leave my students with a good final lesson that left an impression on them. Don’t ruin their image of me.”

“Just between you and me, Professor, I never imagined that everyone adored you that much.”

“Neither did I. I had thought that the students despised me because that was the normal reaction to my ways of discipline...”

Professor Yugiri remained under the influence of my spell even as she spoke. However, she still managed to move forward, step by step, to close the distance between us.

With a wry smile on her lips, she said, “But it seems that you were the exception and hated me to the very end.”

“So you were aware?”

“Of course. After all, you are the honorable future Guardian Knight of Princess Carina...”

I watched as the mana from the witch caused all kinds of spirits to flock around the professor’s body in a deadly swarm. *I’ve never seen such a complicated spell in my life. Dispelling this would be utterly impossible for me right now... I’m completely spent with these wounds all over my body.*

“Speaking of which, there was something else I wanted to tell you, Professor.”

The witch of the north begins her brainwashing by exploiting someone's weakness. When the professor first arrived at Kirsch, I had heard that she hadn't been able to fit in and was high-strung. The witch probably set her sights on the crack she noticed in the professor's mental armor, formed by her life as a Royal Knight, and approached her. Even in the anime, that witch had used similar means to win over Shuya's comrades.

Gathering my thoughts, I said, “Thanks to you, many people suffering from a traumatic incident were saved. I'm sure you know what I am trying to say.”

She was quiet for a moment, then simply said, “It wasn't me.”

“No, I heard all about it. You were the one who told Tina to direct pained students to you. She also mentioned that there were times when you put on the face of a strict professor, but there were also times when that label didn't apply. When you aren't a professor, you are a very kindhearted person, and...she also said that you were very worried about me because I was chosen as the Guardian Knight. After Tina told me all this, I finally realized the truth. Professor, you were trying to...” I trailed off.

The professor was quiet. She had no rebuttals, no response.

I continued. “You were trying to teach me the suffering that a knight's life would bring as best as you could. It wasn't out of spite or jealousy from not being chosen. You were trying to tell the oblivious Slowe Denning that the path of the Guardian Knight is a road made of thorns, and you were trying to discourage me from walking it. I'm right, aren't I, Professor?”

Her silence was more telling than anything else. *That's right. She was trying to test me. She's more knowledgeable than anyone else about the title's hardships, and thus she always asked me whether I truly had the resolve to shoulder it. But... She was probably too clumsy to be tactful about it.*

“I never would have caught on with how you were teaching me, Professor Yugiri...” I mumbled.

The pause after that seemed to stretch on for an eternity, but the professor finally broke it. “In just a few more steps, you will be in reach of my sword. Tell

me... How do you plan on taking me down in my state?”

“To tell you the truth, I have a secret plan that not even you could guess, Professor.”

“I see... I am glad to hear that.”

The Great Spirit of Darkness said that I would be able to see *something* if I got close to the professor. *But I don't see it. Not yet.* I could only feel despair tugging at me at the sight of the professor held captive in an intricate and complex spell.

Or at least...

“Hurry up...and kill me, Slowe Denning.”

...that was what I thought until I noticed *that*.

“If you're still completely in the dark, Slowe Denning, shall I give you a hint?”

With the help of the spirits, Nanatrij's voice reached me. Her offer was very tempting, but, well, I no longer needed it. To my eyes, spirits were visible beings in this world, and I had finally spotted what I was looking for. I saw the tiniest little tremor in the spell surrounding the professor.

“You finally noticed it. She's still resisting. I'd say at this point, calling her an appallingly sore loser wouldn't even cut it.”

Even at this very moment, the witch continued to pour her mana into the spell and controlled the professor like a puppet. However, within this spell so potent that it made even me nauseous, I was able to discern moments when it would flicker.

I could tell that it was caused by the elements of water, light, and wind; the three elements passed down in the professor's bloodline.

“This has been more than enough, Slowe Denning... Don't humiliate me even more than I already have been.”

“That small, internal distortion in the spell... With your ability to see spirits, surely you can turn that into a stepping-stone to victory, can't you?”

Once someone fully embraced the witch's spell, there was no chance of breaking free. Even I had thought that Professor Yugiri had completely fallen into the witch's grasp... *But in truth, she had been fighting all this time.*

Francisca's spell was too labyrinthine for it to be destroyed by an outside force. However, if there was even one hole that connected to its interior, no matter how small, breaking through was no longer impossible. The professor had breached the spell ever so slightly, and thanks to that, I had found the thread that would lead me through the maze.

"But it's out of the question for you right now since you're focusing on Gravity Manipulation, right? The distance makes it difficult too..."

She's such a scary one... How did she even figure that out? Right now, I have my hands full with detaining the professor. I can't cast another spell on top of this! Lasting this long against someone so superior to me is a miracle in the first place.

"Anyway, I'll stop that lady in her tracks for you. Oh, make sure she doesn't realize my presence until the last minute though. To do that... Well, I'm sure you know what to do!"

I was completely in awe. It seemed that the Great Spirit of Darkness knew *everything*. She knew that in order to surpass the witch's spell, I needed to get as close to the professor as possible. *Ideally, I want to get right in front of her, but if I draw that close, I'll be in reach of her sword. If that happened, my head would be sliced off before I could release her from the spell! The spirit said it so easily, but for me, her suggestion was like asking me to willingly hang from the ledge of a bottomless pit...*

"If you plan on taking up my proposal, don't show me such a 'the world is going to end' face! Smile a little!"

I finally figured it out. This wasn't a battle against the witch. It was a simple yes or no question of whether I could trust the Great Spirit of Darkness...and whether I could trust *Charlotte*.

In that case, I have nothing to hesitate about. The professor is slowly but surely inching closer and that scares the hell out of me, but I've figured out her true feelings. So...

I let the stroke of a smile lift the corners of my lips.

In the ruins behind the professor, I noticed Charlotte moving around, trying to gesture something to me. *She's...trying to tell me that I should run away after all?*

I can't do that. I can't run away, Charlotte. Professor Yugiri is still fighting! She's trying to give me a meaningful final lesson even if it means losing her life.

Professor Yugiri always asked me one thing in her lectures without fail: "Do you have the resolve needed for the title?" Every time, I listened with only half an ear, mentally bemoaning that she was so naggy, but she had really been serious about it. Serious about me.

The professor was a supporting presence and on my side. She was earnestly concerned about my future, and nobody could replace her.

"I finally figured it out, Professor. You are much kinder and timider than what your appearance lets on. Your nature doesn't match well with the job of a Royal Knight, you know."

"You really...aren't running, huh..."

"I won't, because I've learned your true feelings, Professor Not-So-Honest-After-All. And if I'm honest, I'm at my limit. I ran around a lot because you chased me, so I'm completely out of stamina."

She paused, then murmured, "That was why I told you so many times that you mustn't keep up that slovenly lifestyle."

"Yeah. You were completely right."

Before I knew it, the professor stood right in front of me with her sword at her hip. She had completely shattered my *Gravity Manipulation* spell. *Perhaps the most fearsome thing here is the witch's abilities.*

"I should have told you everything earlier. Only a fool would take on the post

of the Guardian Knight. You should focus solely on your own happiness. You could even run away to a foreign country with that retainer.”

Once again, Professor Yugiri placed her hand over the sword at her hip. Slowly, ever so slowly, she drew it...and its point laid right against my neck. With one flick of her wrist, she could easily separate my head from my body.

“Professor Yugiri, I misunderstood you. You were not one of but *the* most compassionate person towards me.”

“Took you a little too long to notice... But...I’m also at my limit now... I can’t hold myself back...”

“It’s curious. You used to frustrate me to no end, but now, from the bottom of my heart, I want to save you, Professor.”

“I see... Oddly enough, my mood isn’t too sour anymore either. But it’s impossible. Even now, these hands of mine are trying to kill you... I can’t stop them anymore.”

She was smiling as tears rolled down her cheeks. There was probably only one person who ever had the honor of witnessing such an expression on Professor Yugiri’s face.

Me.

“Professor, you got help from a wicked witch to save the students at Kirsch. Thus, I shall take the hand of an even deeper darkness to save you...a shudderingly titanic evil that would put your crime to shame!”

A shout rang out from a voice that didn’t belong to either of us. “Daryth’s all-elements boy sure has guts!”

Unlike all her statements up until now, she was no longer whispering to me through the spirits. It was the raw voice of the most infamous mage in the world, and the sound shook my eardrums with its unquestionable existence.

“Hand the baton over to me! From here on out, it’s my turn!” the girl yelled.

The commander of Dustour’s forces had hidden inside the ruins all this time. She had made them nearly imperceptible with a powerful glamour enchantment. She had probably done all this so that the vigilant witch Francisca

wouldn't sense her presence at all.

Somewhere down the line, the Great Spirit of Darkness had jumped out of her safety zone and now she stood behind Professor Yugiri. The professor was now sandwiched in a pincer attack between the Great Spirit and me.

"I weave these bonds of destiny from the Land of Eternity, Dustour."

I took a sharp inhale the moment those words left Nanatrij's lips. The spirits swarming around the professor immediately burst into action. They seemed to beg for forgiveness from the girl, trying to express that they had no part in all of this.

However, they weren't the only ones terrified of her small form. I was too. I hadn't even noticed her approach until she was *this* close to us.

Her serene voice resonated loudly, and her chant even sounded more like a song. Nanatrij's hair fluttered as the wind danced around her. *"From all to one, from darkness to flame."*

I could only stare up at the sky with my jaw on the ground. I couldn't help it because embers of flames soared up and began drawing a ridiculously huge symbol in the air!

"Francisca," she said, "this is your punishment."

Scarlet writing in the sky shone with a dizzying shimmer. The witch at the other end of the professor's puppet strings tried to take action to counter it, but it was too late.

"Repent your actions. Boundless Scorched Land, Prominence."

A miniature sun appeared out of nowhere in the blink of an eye. Light severed and tore the darkness of night into shreds, raining down like a waterfall over Professor Yugiri's whole body.

"This... You... You must be kidding me!" I looked directly at the sudden inferno before me, and my gaze was painted a blinding white in the span of seconds. "She was able to cast such an incredible spell in mere moments...?"

The Great Spirit of Darkness kept her promises and was a girl of action. She

always dealt with her underlings' misconduct in person. That was why she had turned up alone in Zenelaus when Dreibach had gone against her orders. *But I never thought she'd go this far.*

"Professor Yugiri!" I yelled. "Are you all right?!"

I hadn't completely regained my sight yet, but I thought back on the scene just now. The burning light engulfing the sky had rained down on the professor, and I could still hear her pained grunts. It was almost as if someone had turned the clock back so it was day, and even right at this very moment, the manifested sun hung there proudly as if it had sworn an oath to eliminate all shadow from the world.

As for me, I fully understood why the spirit had picked this spell. The glaring sun was there to expose a certain *someone* lurking inside Professor Yugiri.

"Slowe Denning! I'm sure you see where your enemy is now!"

The spirit had been right. Francisca's spell had already come apart at the seams. The professor had torn open a hole from inside the wicked prison formed by a kaleidoscope of magic.

I can sense the rampaging magic inside her body. Hey you, Witch. Francisca. Right now, you're desperately pouring your magic into it, aren't you? Well, too bad for you. The Great Spirit's spell has fully demolished all the places where you could take refuge.

"She's going to come out any time now!" Nanatrij yelled. "Prepare yourself!"

The only darkness in this world of light, a small shadow under the professor's feet, squirmed and transformed from a flat object into a solid being. A clump of pure black spilled out like ink. Perhaps she had seen that the odds weren't in her favor.

This had been what the Great Spirit of Darkness had wanted me to notice. If I had gotten close to the professor, I would see the bizarre, wriggling shadow near her feet.

The transformation it was undergoing couldn't be described in any language. It was almost as if it were the materialization of insanity itself. And now, I could clearly see the hand of the black shadow that gripped the spirit. I had known

about this because of the anime, but it was still so horrible to behold that I wanted to shut my eyes.

“Alliance Leader! How could you join forces with the enemy?!” a woman’s voice shouted.

Almost like a ghost, the woman appeared from inside the squirming shade. The black shadow slowly took on the shape of a human, specifically the vague silhouette of a woman. This was the true form of the witch lurking in the shadow: one of the Three Musketeers known as the Dream Dealer Witch.

I must admit that I’m a little frustrated. After all, the Dream Dealer Witch isn’t glaring at me at all—she only has eyes for the Great Spirit of Darkness. Even though the battle has progressed to this point and I’m this close to her...I’m not even worthy of a single glance!

I gritted my teeth. *She’s completely looking down on me.*

“Back off, child. You might be quite a talented one inside the Country of Knights, but surely you can see the world of difference between us,” the woman said, mocking me. “Against someone like you, my victory is set in stone.”

Francisca. A musketeer, the founder of the Potion Dealer Association, and a mage who has never known defeat in her life. Indeed, to you, I am probably inconsequential. That’s just how things are, and I can’t fault her for thinking that. After all, I wasn’t even able to put up a decent resistance against her pawn, Professor Yugiri.

“However, it seems that it would be difficult to crush you at this moment,” the woman noted. “Well then, how about this? If you move out of the way obediently, I shall let you off the hook for now. All right then, move along. Everyone dearly wishes to hang on to their lives and you are no exception, correct?”

I thought back to my journey up until now, starting with No Face, then Sepith Pendragon, the black dragon, and even everything that happened in Zenelaus. My memories from those battles, my experiences from those many life-and-death conflicts, had accumulated and built a sturdy foundation in my heart.

“I can’t step aside now. There’s still something I need to do,” I declared.

“Oh, what a tragedy for one to throw away their own chance at survival. If you are so adamant, could you answer one query of mine?” The witch continued her taunting. “You are a mere child who couldn’t even hope to drag me onto this stage without the Alliance Leader’s help... I would love to know what you think you can accomplish against me.”

While she had been hidden inside the professor’s shadow before, the witch was now a substantial being in front of me. *I wasn’t able to pull you out from the professor myself...but there is something I can do now!*

“I’ll blow away that smug attitude of yours,” I announced slowly.

“That is the best joke I have heard in years! I have vanquished many inferior mages around your level in the north. Let’s see, has it been twenty of them? Thirty? Maybe more.”

This woman hadn’t spared a single look in my direction after Nanatrij’s appearance. I knew that even during our whole conversation, she only actually paid any attention to the spirit.

The witch continued, “An empty barrel makes the most noise... I do believe that figure of speech is perfect for you, Dragon Slayer of the South.”

It was because she thought so little of me that I was able to construct and manifest *this* without being noticed. The Great Spirit of Darkness had erased the shadows from the area so there was no shelter for the witch. I decided I would take it a step further. *I’ll infuse this spell with a firm conviction to not let her escape at all costs.*

“Well, I suppose you can see for yourself whether I’m all bark and no bite... *Glacial World.*”

This spell had a stark contrast to the sun suspended in the air. Frost was the natural predator of all living beings, an antithesis to the heat in the sky, and was my chosen aspect for this moment. The surrounding landscape was rewritten and painted over by wondrous, beautiful strokes of ice, like a scene out of a fairy tale.

I stomped down on the professor’s shadow and the whole vicinity froze with

ice as far as the eye could see. My goal wasn't to counter the churning sun that the spirit had created. That sphere of heat had been made mainly to destroy the witch's paths of escape, but my spell...

The witch still seemed as elusive as a wisp of smoke, but she abruptly changed her leisurely tone. "This is... I've been had!"

This spell of mine put my hardened resolve to never let her slip into the shadows on display, no matter what happened from here on out. I had known that layering the ground with unyielding ice would be the decisive blow against this witch after she had revealed her true form.

"Hm, how curious. You were so confident moments ago about how negligible my presence was, so why are you so flustered now, huh?"

Everything that had happened thus far was just as it had played out in my mind. *The world was finally moving in a peaceful direction, you know? I poured my blood, sweat, and tears into this. Listen up, lady. A character who randomly appeared out of nowhere has no right to get in the way of my efforts finally bearing fruit!*

The witch paused, and when she spoke again, there was a frantic note in her voice. "Alliance Leader! Do you not think that you have gone too far...? Just how much information about me have you spread to the enemy?!"

"With this, you can't run away now. After all, your real body is always in the shadows," I said steadily.

I saw my silhouette clearly in the witch's eyes. This musketeer, who had been dealing with Nanatrij's spell all the while, finally looked at me. The feared Dream Dealer Witch, the woman who had devastated several countries in the north as a one-man army, held terror in her eyes for a single moment, and I didn't miss it.

The witch was a mage who could run anywhere she wanted to as long as there were shadows for her to connect to and move around in. Unfortunately for her, I had locked her real body in its place.

"This cursed ice..." she hissed. "Just how much is there?!"

"As much as you can imagine! And now, you're stuck!"

“How dare you! You are nothing without my Alliance Leader’s support! And yes, I do know whom Dreibach lost to in Zenelaus, but that doesn’t change anything!”

The witch likely had a constant enchantment up that made her features hard to detect, but now while she was feeling shaken, I could see her expression clearly. It was the face of a woman with unmatched beauty that was twisted with rage. If looks could kill, I would have been long dead. I laughed nervously in my mind. *She’s terrifying!*

The witch’s voice matched her expression. “Slowe Denning. Remember that you weren’t the one who turned the tides—”

“Oh shut up, I know that! You’re right! I’m a mage who doesn’t belong in this battle at all. Compared to you, I’m inferior at best! I’m aware, so shut your trap!”

If this had been a one-on-one battle, I wouldn’t have been able to put up a moment of resistance against her. In Zenelaus, I had also only been able to find victory against Dreibach because of Eldred’s help. It had way more to do with the Great Spirit than my own merits.

I knew better than anyone else that I was weak. Compared to the genuinely fearsome warriors in this world, I was exceedingly pathetic. Even if I could easily win against medium-level opponents like No Face and Sepith Pendragon, doing that couldn’t truly change the fate of the world. *My abilities are so frustratingly...half-assed.*

“Listen up! All this time, I have made use of *everything* I possibly could so that I can fulfill my selfish goals!” The memories I had of the anime had given me an absolute advantage, and with those, I could never lose. “And I’ll continue doing that! For the sake of my selfish desires—”

Trapped with no way out, the witch was on the receiving end of the scorching attack of the floating sun. This woman likely could no longer hear my voice at all, but...I still had to finish my thought.

I’m weak. And because of that, in another world, I struggled pathetically all by myself to overturn those heavy adversities sent my way. I fought alone and lost alone.

“—and for the sake of realizing my dream that once slipped from my grasp like sand, I’ll even join hands with a devil!”

“Prominence and Glacial World...” The witch trailed off. “You took me by surprise, yes, but as long as I have enough time, I can produce an infinite number of shadows!”

Musketeer and Dream Dealer Witch, the world is becoming peaceful, and I won’t allow you to barge in and mess it up now!

Which was why—

“Don’t you dare pop up uninvited...”

—clenching Professor Yugiri’s sword, I thrust its tip down towards the witch’s real body, hidden inside the flat shadow on the ground. It was the shadow of the witch who hadn’t known a single defeat in her lifetime.

“...and get in the way of *my* future!!!”



Final Chapter: How about We Join Forces?

The witch groaned as she pressed a hand over her chest. An unbearably excessive amount of black blood gushed out, and I could barely look. To me, it seemed that her mind hadn't caught up to what had just occurred.

But she wasn't alone in this storm of emotions, because it had been the first time I had ever stabbed someone. *I think...my hands are still shaking.* I always fought like a stereotypical mage, and the thing I was the worst at was engaging an enemy in close quarters. It must have been a sick joke by Lady Luck that I was doing a poor imitation of a swordsman. *I mean, I only stabbed her shadow, but still.*

"Ha ha... It has been such a long time since I last saw my own blood. Aha ha, ha ha ha..." Suddenly, the witch who had hidden her body inside the shadow erupted in loud laughter.

What's with her? Is she taking her loss badly or something? Hm, that doesn't seem right... The woman ran her fingers through the blood spilling out from her chest and cupped her hands as a warped, enraptured expression appeared on her face.

"Don't waste your time attempting healing spells." There was a calmness to my voice. "I've infused the sword with poison and enchanted it with a healing debuff. You'll only cause yourself unneeded pain."

"I see, so that is why I am not finding any success." She chuckled. "I must say, I never imagined that I would be on the receiving end of your sword, Yugiri."

That sword was Professor Yugiri's trusty sidekick. I would probably never find another sword that was this easy to poison and enchant.

The witch took a sidelong glance at the professor, who had been out cold for a long time, as well as the sword that had fallen by the professor's side. And then, the witch looked up at the sky. There, a behemoth sphere of fire hung, illuminating the whole forest and preventing even a speck of darkness from

existing. It was because of *Prominence*, the spell that the Great Spirit of Darkness had shot up into the air.

“You’re a pitiful sight, Francisca. Serves you right.”

I had only just noticed that the Great Spirit had approached us. I turned my attention to the ruins, and the glamour was still in place. *Good, Charlotte’s still safe there. Looks like Nanatrij is intent on completely hiding Charlotte from the witch.*

“Alliance Leader... That is such a splendid spell.” The witch sighed in awe. “With something like that in the sky, you removed all of the shadows I could’ve escaped into. Not only that, but I did not notice your presence until the last minute, right at the moment your spell activated. I must say, I am rather surprised you knew I was here.”

“You gave me a nasty shock, you know,” Nanatrij replied. “I showed up and what? You were playing with Slowe Denning! Thanks to that distraction over there I was able to gain the upper hand, so I suppose it all worked out in the end. But surely you must have expected me to come after you or something since you did go against my wishes.”

“I thought that your longtime subordinates might appear and get in my way, yes, but I never imagined that you yourself would come. That is not the pressing question right now, however... Alliance Leader, just how many of my secrets have you told this boy?”

“Zilch! I haven’t told him a thing. In fact, I’m also astonished. Slowe Denning, first with that *Glacial World*, then that poisoned blade... Somebody couldn’t come up with this strategy unless they knew the true nature of Francisca’s powers. Curiouser and curiouser... Just who *are* you to know all that?”

I gulped. *Yikes, I’m toast if they interrogate me! From the looks of it, Nanatrij is wary because of what I did.*

“You have not, or so you say... I am impressed that you are able to blather such shameless things while keeping a straight face. You are just about the only person in the world who knows my secret, Alliance Leader, and somehow this child *also* knew that secret. I am no fool.”

“Oh, who cares about that? Francisca, you went against my will, and this is what you get for doing that. I repeat, serves you right! So, what are you going to do? Keep fighting? Or surrender?”

Wow, I thought, deeply impressed. Everyone here is intimidated by the Great Spirit of Darkness. It's a little vexing to admit it, but she's in complete control of this situation.

While the two continued their conversation, I was on high alert so that the witch wouldn't escape our clutches.

“Alliance Leader, are you serious about throwing away our dearest wish of uniting the continent as one?”

“I do distinctly remember saying I was doing that, yes. The empire is too fatigued right now. There is no need for further conflict. Thoughtlessly poking your head into things would only put a noose around your own neck. I'm sure that *you* know that better than anyone else right now, yeah?”

The witch paused. “Indeed. Nothing has gone according to my expectations at all, be it your visit or the presence of the Great Spirit of Wind... However, the problem that plagues my mind the most is that someone in the south knew of my true form and nature.”

“And the ‘solution’ you're thinking of right now is the exact opposite of what I want. That guy is the candidate for the next Guardian Knight of Daryth. If people hear that such a person was killed by an agent of the north, all my plans will be ruined. I'd *never* let you do that.”

“Alliance Leader...” Her tone was dangerous. “Are you ordering me to spare the life of someone who knows that much about me? I have experienced utter humiliation. Can you imagine what is on my mind right now?”

Welp, sure, keep ignoring me. I'm just a tree, I guess! That aside, even Nanatrij knows that I was given the offer to become the Guardian Knight, huh. From what she's said so far, it sounds like she truly has no plans of taking over the south at all. And she even seemed to cover for me here and there. I find it hard to believe, but it looks like the Great Spirit truly is here as our grand ally!

“You're not the only one surprised here though. I was also shocked because

nothing could be more perfect than that guy's response, you know? Maybe that means that the intelligence agencies of the south aren't all that worthless after all... Or, Slowe Denning, maybe you're the odd one out here?"

I could understand why they were so suspicious of me. Unless I knew about the true nature of the witch and how she could move around inside shadows, I wouldn't have used *Glacial World* to freeze the surface of the ground. *If I remember correctly, the witch's background story said that only the Great Spirit of Darkness knew of her secret. But I still had to do it, because it was the only way to guarantee the witch's defeat here.*

"Alliance Leader, are you taking me for a fool? Nobody would buy such rubbish."

"It's the truth! Have you been shocked so silly that you can't even face reality?"

Oh boy, the Great Spirit's taking so many digs at her. Wasn't that lady supposed to be one of Nanatrij's most trusted comrades as one of the Three Musketeers? Sheesh!

"Francisca," the spirit addressed. "You're such a jealous person that I'm shocked your skin isn't green. Of *course* I can easily read what you're thinking right now."

"Up until now, I have always made people repay their debts to me in full. Honestly, I want to take my revenge right now...but it seems that running away is much more important. If I were to lose here, I could not work towards my virtuous goals."

"Virtuous? *You*? Hah! And do you really think you can run away from this place?"

"R-Right, exactly!" I stammered. "You definitely can't get out! Never!"

Eep! I made one interjection and then they both glared at me to shut up! I'm shaking in my boots! And, uh...I know I'm the one who said it, but that totally felt like I jinxed it. I should be more cautious about my actions...

"You heard what that guy said. Don't take me so lightly and think that you could slip out of *this*."

“Prominence and Glacial World are indeed awe-inspiring spells. However, if I lack an exit, I can just make one.”

Why is the witch so confident? She doesn’t think that she’ll be taken captive at all. Does she really think she can run away successfully from Nanatrij and me?

“Alliance Leader, I suppose I shall bid you farewell with one last parting gift.”

Not even a second after the witch finished her sentence, the change happened.

The witch’s lips trembled and her whole body gave one large shudder, and then there was the thunderous roar of something ripping the atmosphere apart. The roar was so loud, in fact, that it didn’t end at booming inside the forest. It was like an attack of sound that could shake the whole *world*.

My feet trembled uncontrollably and a sickening chill consumed my whole body, as if someone had wedged ice needles right into my spine.

It was a pathetic display on my part, but I had to beg the spirit for her wisdom. “G-Great Spirit of Darkness... Wh-What is this noise?”

The witch is still over there. The miniature sun is still in the sky. The ground is fortified by ice, so moving inside the shadows is not an option. Despite being in a nightmare scenario, the witch is staring up at the sky so calmly. What the heck?

Nanatrij frowned. “I messed up. To think that you had such an ace up your sleeve...”

“Alliance Leader, I have hidden myself away in this forest for a lengthy period of time. Doing so gave me time to prepare a little something that would provide me with an escape route, even if my enemy was you.”

“Francisca, what you’re doing is—”

“Now, please enjoy the show to the fullest. *Starfall.*”

When I caught sight of the sky, I thought it was the end of the world. No one could blame me for thinking that because *something* was starting to fall from behind the clouds. And whatever it was was a size that easily dwarfed Nanatrij’s artificial sun that already hung in the sky.

Without missing a beat, I called off my *Glacial World* spell. *This isn't the time to think about capturing the witch; it's time to focus on surviving! Right now, dealing with the imminent approach of that thing from the sky takes top priority.* I ran towards the building that Charlotte was hiding in. *Oh, I see the Great Spirit has lifted Prominence as well.*

Charlotte had been furtively spying on us from the ruined window all this time. She saw my expression and must have noticed how pale I was because she poked her head outside the window and looked at the sky... *And down she goes. Fainted and out cold.*



Yeah, that's probably for the best. Honestly, if I could, I'd like to pretend I'm blind and think about roses and rainbows instead, but... I forced the gears in my mind to spin faster so I could come up with a solution. Yeah...no. A spell that could destroy a meteor that ridiculously huge is absolutely not in my arsenal.

What the hell is going on? Nobody could have imagined this in their wildest dreams! Who could have predicted that the witch of the Dustour Empire would break ties with the Great Spirit of Darkness?!

"Slowe Denning, you're weak, so focus only on protecting yourself, you hear me?"

And Great Spirit, how could you be so calm with that thing out there?! Seriously, where do you get that kind of assertiveness? I'm begging you here, please tell me!

Her next move, however, quickly taught me that her confidence wasn't just for show.

"Amazing..." I whispered slowly.

The assortment of spells used by the spirit was simple, but they were much mightier than if I were to cast those same spells. *Wait, did she just cast the earth spell Mineral Smash, Earth Prison? Ah, I see. It's because the main component of the meteor is— Huh? A fire spell now? And a darkness one this time. Jeez, this is crazy!*

I didn't have a clue about how the spirit had decided what set of spells to cast. There was only one thing I knew, and that was the fact that the meteor, which had been a size beyond comprehension, was gradually smashed into pieces.

The sight was stunning. Compared to her skill, my spells were mere party tricks. *This was the real deal, a true miracle. That's right, this was how magic was supposed to be. The power to turn the impossible into reality. Commoners who can't use magic probably stare at us mages with awe, and that exact same look is in my eyes right now.*

"As somebody who can see spirits, the difference between our power should

be pretty clear to you, yeah?” the miracle maker said flippantly.

Starfall, the meteor that the witch had crafted high above the clouds, had been torn into pieces by the Great Spirit’s spells. However, an alarming amount of heavy rock matter was still falling from the sky. If those things crashed into the ground, the results would be catastrophic.

Nanatrij sighed, sounding exasperated. “What are you so worried about? That other guy is here too, remember?”

“That other guy”? The Great Spirit of Darkness is always so cryptic with her words. Can she not be bothered to explain? If that’s the case, she could just give me a simple answer or something!

Who is she even talking about? Prominence was lifted, night has returned to the world, and the witch ran away. There’s nobody else here—

However, the disaster that threatened to descend upon our heads was indeed blocked by *that guy*, who had leaped right into the air. They only seemed to claw at the air, but they had actually cast a respectable wind spell. With one hit from the Great Spirit of Wind, the remnants of the meteor were smashed into a fine dust.

What kind of ridiculous power is that? But...this is the force of a Great Spirit, after all. Yeah, that’s right. The beings known as the Great Spirits are this absurd. They’re monstrous individuals that a human mage could never compare to, and that’s what defines them.

“Well, I suppose I can give you a passing mark. If you didn’t come out at all because you were terrified of me, I *really* would have killed you, Great Spirit of Wind.”

“Disappear at once, meow...”

I had never heard the Great Spirit of Wind speak in such a tone. They were emitting a murderous aura that would even make someone like me jump away on instinct, and they slammed it all like a weapon towards the Great Spirit of Darkness. Their tail bristled and stood straight up in the air in a way I had never seen before, and it was obvious that they were in serious mode. *Yikes, it feels like we’re one straw away from breaking the camel’s back, and these two might*

start a death match at any moment. This makes me so nervous.

“Whaaat? I dare you to say that again, Altanger! Did you just tell me to disappear? Let me remind you that *I* was the one who protected your precious children just now.”

Since Altanger didn't reply, the Great Spirit of Darkness continued. “If I wasn't here, everyone would be dead by now, or are you too stupid to see that? Charlotte taking cover in those ruins and Slowe Denning over there would both have become discarded toys in Francisca's hands. And what kind of a hello did I get from the scaredy-cat that hid all the time, hm? Who do you think you are?”

Wha...huh?! The Great Spirit of Wind moved...and hid behind me. Hey! No way! Where did your initial intimidating demeanor go?! I sighed inwardly. Ugh, Altanger, why are you like this? I knew about the rigid hierarchy of Great Spirits and all, but still... I guess I shouldn't be too surprised. The Great Spirit of Wind did say that they definitely didn't want anything to do with her.

“Moving on to more important matters...” Nanatrij turned to me. “Slowe Denning, just how much do you know?”

I paused, choosing my next words carefully. “About what?”

“Oh, don't play dumb with me. I'm talking about that woman's abilities and that stuff that happened in Zenelaus. It's obvious that you know something, or else a lot of things don't add up.”

Well... Two of the Three Musketeers, warriors that Nanatrij had absolute faith in, suffered defeat at the hand of a random guy in the south whom she knew little about. I'm not surprised she'd want to demand answers from me. If she takes a page out of the witch's book and directly looks into my mind, I'm done for! The witch should be the only person who can do such a thing, but...the joke could be on me and she might actually know brainwashing magic too. That would be awful, to say the least.

I braced myself and stood there, alert. I figured that this was a do-or-die situation, but...

“Well, there's something else that's more important right now, so I don't really care about that.”

My eyes widened. “Huh?”

“Francisca is serious. She’s trying to carve a rift between the north and the south all on her own. If a war starts and southern troops start marching in, what am I supposed to do? Sit back and bite my nails? No way. I have to decimate any approaching threats. She probably chose such a scheme because she knows me very well.” She sighed. “Give me a break already.”

“A war wouldn’t start so eas—”

“Trust me, it would. You don’t know how tense things are at the front lines, do you? All it takes is one single catalyst to make things spiral out of control. Plus, that birdbrain dared to cast a flashy spell like *Starfall*! Curse her! Your school is probably going crazy right now on the other side of this forest.”

I gasped, realizing the implications of what had gone on here.

Nanatrij started preening herself. “That aside, I’m such a genius! I let Rooney give advance warning to several potential targets, but just like I predicted, it ended up being here. The thought process of a birdbrain is so easy to read.”

“So you *were* the person who sent that man...”

“Yep, ’twas me! But you weren’t the only one I sent a warning to. Well well, look at that expression on your face. Maybe you don’t understand how I figured it out? It’s obvious: it’s because *you’re* around. I can’t believe this. Don’t you see the consequences of all the ridiculous stuff you’ve done? You’ve taken down my pawns one after another, so it’s only natural that Francisca would be interested in you.”

I couldn’t even come up with a retort because she was right. Anyone would do the same if they learned that I had beaten several assassins sent by Nanatrij.

“Let’s get down to business. You owe me big time. You understand that much, right?”

I couldn’t have fended off the witch alone. After all, I wouldn’t even have caught a glimpse of her if the Great Spirit of Darkness hadn’t dragged the woman out of the shadows. Instead, this would have ended in a drawn-out, long-distance battle with Professor Yugiri, which would’ve ended when I was spent.

“Yeah, I know...” I muttered. “So, Nanatrij, what do you want from me?”

“I want to get rid of that woman. But to do that, just having you on my side isn’t enough. You’re insufficient for the task at best. If we want to kill her reliably, I need more strength on my side than just you.”

“I mean, I admit I’m not up to the task, but...” *I don’t get it. Why is Nanatrij going out of her way to remind me that I’m indebted to her? What does she want me to do?*

“You’re a bit slow, aren’t you? Can you really call yourself the Prodigy of Wind from House Denning? Fine, I’ll make it clear for you.” Nanatrij paused. “People say that you’re the candidate for the ‘Guardian Knight’ or something, aaand...”

I have learned a clear, painful lesson that if my opponents are musketeers, I can’t put up a good fight one-on-one. So what in the world does she want from someone like me?

“...I am *ordering* you to arrange a meeting between me, Queen Eleanor Daryth, and the Great Spirit of Light, Lectrikuhl.”

Afterword

Whenever I find dead cicadas lying on my balcony, it really makes me feel the summer vibes.

But uh...isn't it a little *too* hot this year?

Every year, I take extra care so the summer heat fatigue doesn't get to me, but I've failed completely this time! I thought I would be fine because I ignored all the classic summer events this year: fireworks, swimming in the sea, camping outdoors... Unfortunately, it didn't work. However, I've heard that grapefruit is a great remedy against hot weather fatigue, so I've been sipping away at my grapefruit juice every day.

Thinking that I can't let this go on, I dine out sometimes, but, well... Um... Tokyo has way too many people! There are so many of them, I can't take it anymore! Between that and the roasting sun... Okay, this year, I shall continue my annual ritual of turning the air conditioner on max and quietly mimicking a hermit.

Now then, *Piggy Duke* volume six will be sold at (nearly) the same time as the *Piggy Duke* manga's volume one in September. To commemorate the release of the manga's first volume, the extra short stories and other extra content I wrote were also reminiscent of those times. They're set in the period when Slowe was still inarguably a piggy!

Please enjoy *Piggy Duke* volume six together with volume one of the manga. I think the manga is easier to pick up than the novel and is also really entertaining in a comical way!

Rhythm Aida

(Published October 20, 2018)



6

Nanatrij

The Great Spirit of Darkness and
supreme ruler of the Dustour Empire.

Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



“I don’t remember there being anyone in this empire who would go against me.”

“ ”
...

Rooney Blough
Nanatrij’s subordinate, whose abilities are fairly on-par with those of the Three Musketeers.

“Alliance Leader, please tell me why you scrapped your plans to invade the south.”

Francisca
One of the Three Musketeers. Famous for once bringing salvation to the masses and honored as the Dream Dealer Witch.



“I hear that Princess Carina was in your care during her stay at this institution, as well as during the attack of the black dragon.”

“No, I didn’t really do any—”

Yugiri Asahi

The only woman in the Order of Royal Knights, Daryth’s pride and joy.

Slowe Denning

The protagonist who reincarnated into the world of his favorite anime. The third son of House Denning and a problem student at Kirsch Mage Institute. Or at least he used to be...?

A full-page illustration of a young girl with long, flowing, light pink hair tied in a high ponytail with a white bow. She has a soft, blushing expression and is looking down. She is wearing a dark grey or black dress with a white collar and long sleeves. The background is a dark, starry night sky with some green foliage visible at the bottom.

“Master
Slowe,
nobody
is more
fitting
to be the
noble
Guardian
Knight
than you!”

Charlotte Lily Huzak

The princess of the once-great kingdom of Huzak, now destroyed. Currently Slowe’s retainer, a far cry from her former royal position.



“Don’t you
dare pop up
uninvited
and get in the
way of my
future!!!”

The Great Spirit of
Darkness erased the
shadows from the area
so there was no shelter
for the witch. I decided
to take it a step further
I’ll infuse this spell
with a firm conviction
to not let her escape at
all costs.

Translator's Notes

Welcome back to this latest edition of Weird Trivia. I'm Zihan, the translator for *Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke*! I'd like to share some background information about some of the more obscure terms we had to localize, so let's jump right into it!

Prologue: The One Who Goes against the Tide

Let sleeping dogs lie

In the prologue, Rooney thinks that when Francisca is involved, letting sleeping dogs lie is the best policy. The original term here can be roughly translated to “the *kami* (‘ghosts’) one stays away from are the ones that won’t curse you.”

Though written with the kanji that means “god,” the *kami* here actually refers to vengeful ghosts that would reappear in the world of the living. These were known as *tatarigami*, wrathful spirits that caused catastrophes like natural disasters, pandemics, or terrible harvests. This is part of the *Goryou* faith, literally “honorable spirits,” which was established near the Heian period. In ancient Japan, it was thought that people who died a tragic death with resentment in their hearts (such as warriors defeated on the battlefield or overthrown politicians) would come back as *tatarigami* and let their wrath curse their enemies.

However, if one could appease them by giving them posthumous promotions or by worshipping them as gods, these ghosts would instead protect people as *Goryou* (“honorable spirits”). One of the most famous deified ghosts would be Sugawara no Michizune, who was a scholar, poet, and politician in the Heian period. He is worshiped as the *Tenjin*, the patron god of learning in the *Shinto* faith. It is said that there are over 12,000 *Tenmanguu* shrines dedicated to Sugawara no Michizune in Japan.

Back in the days when the *Goryou* faith was at its prime, people believed that approaching ghosts voluntarily would only lead to disaster. Staying away was the best way to deal with them, which led to this expression.

A bolt from the blue

To Francisca, news of Dreibach's defeat in Zenelaus was a bolt from the blue. The original term here, *nemimi ni mizu*, can be roughly translated to "water in a sleeping ear" and describes a state of extreme shock after learning about something completely unexpected.

There are two prevailing theories about this term's origins. The first saying goes that it refers to being awoken from sleep by the sound of water, which in this case refers to disasters like floods or tsunamis. In the past when flood control measures were insufficient and there were no weather forecasts, floods were unpredictable and extremely dangerous. Thus, hearing the sound of water when asleep would ring alarm bells in one's mind, shocking them awake and alerting them to danger.

The second possible origin takes the phrase literally to mean water entering someone's ears while they are asleep. In old literature like *Taikouki*, which is Toyotomi Hideyoshi's biography, a similar expression can be found with this same meaning. It is said that the term "enter one's ears" was interpreted as something literally entering the ear canal, rather than listening to a sound.

Either way, both cases would be a rather nasty shock!

Chapter 1: The Manor in the Denning Lands

Repeating until one's mouth is sour

Mallow repeatedly emphasized to the maids that they must not spoil Slowe after he comes out of his room. The term used here can be roughly translated as “repeating until one’s mouth is sour,” an idiom describing when someone repeats a warning or advice over and over again.

There are a few theories about its origins. One is that after talking for a long time, saliva builds up in your mouth, which is similar to what happens after eating something sour. The second, however, is a complete contrast to the first, saying that one’s throat is parched and painful after talking for a long time as if acid has passed through.

It's all over

After experiencing a setback during his persuasion of Mallow, Slowe thinks that things are unsalvageable. The term used here, *banji kyuusu*, can be literally translated as “ten thousand things take a rest,” meaning that everything has come to an end. This term was often used in Chinese historical works dating back as far as the Tang dynasty.

In Japan, the most famous example associated with this term is in the Chinese historical work *History of Song* written in 1345, which records the history of the Song dynasty. One of the entries in the book featured a king named Gao Baoxu (924-962) in Jingnan, one of the Ten Kingdoms in southern-central China. He had been spoiled rotten by his father ever since he was young, and it was said that he would even smile to placate people after inciting their anger. The people of Jingnan lamented that everything was over, that this country was done for, using the above term. As a ruler, Gao Baoxu was pretty terrible. He ordered many wasteful construction projects that fatigued his people and caused them to resent him. He was known for his extensive debauchery, summoning prostitutes and muscular men to his palace for orgies while he and his concubines enjoyed the view from behind bamboo screens. And indeed, not too soon after his death, the kingdom of Jingnan was dissolved.

Chapter 2: The Newly Appointed Professor

Taboo

Slowe mentions how the thought of seeking personal happiness was taboo for members of House Denning. The word used here is *gohattou*, referring to things that are banned by law or are generally taboo.

The laws of the Edo shogunate were referred to as the *hattou*. It is said that this term originated from a lumpy food made from a mixture of flour and water known as *hatto*. Due to the steep taxes in the Edo period, peasants couldn't even afford to eat a sufficient amount of rice. They then began using wheat in the fields for food instead, kneading and boiling the mixture to fill their stomachs. Seeing this, feudal lords began to fear that rice farming would suffer and banned such wheat dishes. In this way, the *hatto* was said to have inspired the term *hattou* ("law/ban").

Hell ears

Slowe mentions that he has great hearing, comparable to a bat. The original term used here is *jigokumimi*, literally "Hell ears" or "ears of Hell." This phrase has several meanings, and here it refers to someone with remarkably sharp hearing who is able to pick up other people's whispers. The judge of the afterlife in Hell is said to know everything that goes on in the world of the living, and one cannot hide any information from them. In other words, nobody can lower their voice enough to escape the "ears of Hell."

Chapter 3: The Solitude of the Guardian Knight

Leaving one with no choice

Slowe mentions how everyone seems to be closing off his options regarding the offer of Guardian Knight. The idiom used here is “filling up the outer moat (of a castle),” referring to when someone chooses to deal with surrounding obstacles first before tackling the main issue head-on.

Many of the older Japanese castles built on flatland had moats around them to prevent enemy invasions, and most castles had two or three moats. The idiom specifically refers to the outermost moat.

The idiom itself is said to have originated from the siege of Osaka that took place from 1614 to 1615. During the 1614 winter campaign peace negotiations, one of the conditions was that the Toyotomi had to allow Tokugawa’s men to fill the outer moat of Osaka Castle. In exchange for doing that and dismantling the two outermost walls, the Tokugawa shogunate promised that they would ensure the safety of Toyotomi Hideyori and his territory. The Tokugawa shogunate immediately enforced the conditions, and the Osaka Castle’s defenses were pretty much rendered useless. Due to this, in the summer campaign of 1615, the castle wasn’t able to mount a proper defense in time and the moment the forces of Toyotomi were chased back to the castle, they were already doomed. Thus, this idiom was born.

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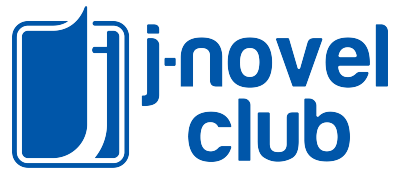
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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!
Volume 6

by Rhythm Aida

Translated by Zihan Gao Edited by T. Burke

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